Two Studies on Monasticism and Saints in 5th-7th Century Byzantium,
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Chapter 25, "Monasticism," by Philip Rousseau; and Chapter 26, "Holy Men," by Peter Brown.
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CHAPTER 25

MONASTICISM

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Devotion to asceticism was a highly visible and in some ways alarming feature of the late Roman world. That thousands of men and women were ready to adopt a life of radical simplicity, sexual abstinence and apparent indifference to wealth, status and power, and that even larger numbers were willing to admire if not imitate their choice, tells us something remarkable about the society in which they lived. Restrictions in diet and sexual behaviour had been accepted for centuries; and abnegation was frequently accompanied by a rejection of influence in public affairs and of privilege and property. Christians, however, from the third century onwards, were responsible for an unprecedented upsurge in ascetic devotion. The movement transformed town as well as countryside: famous exemplars may have congregated at first in remoter districts; but a new class of citizen became more widely evident at an early stage. Distinguished at times by an appalling emaciation of the body, by filth and infestation, by ragged, colourless and skimpy clothes, large numbers of these ascetics converged, at moments of crisis, on the cities themselves, forming virtual mobs that were capable not only of menace but of real power. Within a relatively short time, they occupied special and prominent buildings, administered successful rural estates, broadcast their views in public fora, and gained the ear of those in power – invading, in other words, the chief components of the late Roman polity.

This outburst of negation – against the body, the family, the accepted canons of economic and political success – demands historical explanation. There was a view of the self and of the world that gave the ascetic movement its cohesion, its capacity for organic development and its broadening appeal. Conversely, the structure and growth of its institutions at once encouraged and protected the ascetic urge. To that extent, the phenomenon had a life and significance of its own. Yet ascetics developed also a subtle relationship with society at large. They regarded their interpretation of human nature, of psychology and anthropology, as defining both the power and the destiny of any human person. So the stable society they created for themselves – its routine, its economy, its sense of order and authority – stood also as an invitation, a call to 'conversion'. Ascetics could

appear eccentric, 'alternative', even anarchic. Yet they did not merely abandon, let alone undermine or destroy, traditional society. They were participants in a wide public debate – about the nature of authority and leadership, about the appropriate mechanisms of social formation, about the very tradition to which Christianity was entitled to appeal. Although their own system was never likely to usurp or absorb all others, the tolerance and admiration they inspired was proof of the central role they had to play in the definition of a Christian society.

In describing and explaining, therefore, the structures of the ascetic life, we have to recognize the influence of ideology – both the theories proper to the ascetic communities themselves, and the principles that affected their relations with the outside world. By the early fifth century, of course, precedents had been established; in particular, a widespread preference for community life. The earliest archaeological evidence in Egypt, from the 'Cells' just south of the Delta, shows how quickly the little brick shelters of the solitaries made famous in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* were gathered around common courtyards and buildings within a low perimeter wall, providing company while preserving independence.[1] It is no surprise to find that, while more isolated heroes like Antony remained prominent in ascetic literature, the formal prescriptions of Pachomius and Basil gained increasing allegiance, in both east and west, and for theoretical reasons. If those ascetics who could read were still content with anecdote and individual portrait – and the Greek *Sayings* themselves, the *Pratum Spirituale* or *Spiritual Meadow* of John Moschus, and a long series of Latin *Vitae* suggest that that was the case – they did so amidst a growing crowd of coenobitic colleagues. It was within that community structure that monks now conducted their debates as to how they should organize their lives. Should they pursue a 'contemplative' or an 'active' life? The choice they faced, in the language of the time, was between 'theory' and 'practice' (*θεωρία* and *πρακτική*), between vision and love, between prayer and reflection on the one hand and a concern for the ignorant and needy on the other; but, whatever the option, it was to be embraced in the company of fellow devotees.

If ideology governed structure, we need to arm ourselves from the outset with a clear understanding of ascetic literature – an understanding of the varied circumstances, forms and motives that colour the material upon which we depend. Broadly speaking, we catch in the sources, at various moments of frozen textuality, what was in fact a developing tradition, in which 'rules' and biographies (not always easily distinguished) attracted additions, made often undeclared adjustments and abandoned embarrassing antecedents. Now and again, a writer might look back in a more ordered and reflective way, and make a calculated statement about

[1] Walters (1974) 9f., 102f.

spiritual values, effective practices and hallowed or authentic genealogies. Biographies could serve that reflective purpose also, as well as treatises on virtue or prayer. Finally, any extended text could then be broken up again, and pasted piecemeal within the rolling narratives of the ascetic world.

The classic example of such development we have mentioned already – the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* or *Apophthegmata Patrum*. As they stand in our printed editions, the *Sayings* date from a period at least a little later than that studied here. In addition to preserved elements of an originally oral tradition, gathered from a range of places, but in the first instance, perhaps, from Egyptian exiles in Palestine, they included brief extracts from longer *Lives*, some of which we possess, and collections of embryonic 'rules'. It is possible to observe, also, not least by reference to independently preserved though shorter collections, some of the staggered phases through which the literary accumulation of the *Sayings* themselves progressed.[2] In the matter of 'rules' more generally, the work of Jerome on Pachomius and of Rufinus on Basil, when compared with later compilations, demonstrate the piecemeal way in which at first such guidance was formulated and dispersed: an impression corroborated in biographical accounts.[3]

A readiness to add moss to such rolling stones did not die out in later periods. John Moschus is the best example (died 619). He travelled widely, collecting stories about ascetics here and there; but he did not attempt to build, on the strength of that, an integrated picture of the religious life. To some extent he reflected thereby the conditions of his age. By then, monastic communities were less bound together under the banners of theological party than they had been earlier in the sixth century, and more threatened by the newer and rather different pressure of Persian aggression.[4] The central motive in Moschus' work (as, perhaps, in the *Apophthegmata* before him) was to record, as quickly as possible and as confusedly as might be necessary, a way of life that seemed at any moment likely to disappear. It is ironic that such improvisation in the face of apparent decline should contribute, within the framework of monastic literature as a whole, to a reversal of the process, whereby values challenged in the sixth-century setting could be recollected and admired with almost canonic tranquillity in the more assured circumstances of later Byzantine monasticism. Turning back to what Moschus might have regarded as the secure heyday of the ascetic movement, as recorded earlier in the sixth century by Cyril of Scythopolis and John of Ephesus, we sense at once that we are dealing with texts more consciously governed by a thesis (largely doctrinal), even if anecdote and hitherto scattered literary sources can be detected in

[2] The best existing introduction is Guy (1962); but the forthcoming edition of the *Sayings* by Chiara Faraggiana will carry interpretation much further forward.

[3] The development of the Basilian 'rules' is the best documented, by Gribomont (1953).

[4] Binns (1994) 49.

their compositions. These authors were more settled, wedded to the interests of particular institutions, with access to libraries, albeit modest. They worked in an atmosphere of enquiry, even scholarship; and their books were preserved precisely by the survival of the physical resources upon which they depended.[5]

We have to be on our guard, therefore, not to confuse the development of the literature itself with the development of forms of the ascetic life. A suspicion, for example, that disjointed anecdotes, passed orally from hermit to hermit, found their way eventually into the libraries of complex communities is in any case a simplistic assessment of the surviving texts and dangerously wedded to the notion that those texts reflect directly the changing social patterns of the world that produced them. So, for example, when Cyril describes a 'return to the cities' on the part of Palestinian monks – a development described below – we should not imagine that all monks in Palestine viewed their world in that way or shared in his delight.[6]

When we do try to explain either the pace or the direction of development in ascetic society, the lasting and, at times, paradoxical popularity of Egyptian-based literature can tempt us to adopt a diffusionist view, taking Egypt as the fount and all other places as dependent. Certainly, Egypt came to occupy a special place in the Christian understanding of asceticism; and its practices were adopted more and more elsewhere, supplanting local and in some cases ancient traditions. That did not happen, however, simply by transporting the 'rules' of Pachomius or any other prescriptive text to different parts of the empire. By the early years of the fifth century, the legacy of Pachomius, originating in the Thebaid, had in any case been modified by his disciples and by transmission northwards within Egypt itself. Besa's *Life of Shenoute*, for example, whatever the attachment of its hero to rigorous order, shows him operating happily within an ascetic society quite loose in structure and tolerant of mobility, at one moment loving solitude, at another in contact with the secular world: more akin to what we find in Rufinus, Palladius and the *Sayings of the Fathers*, and sympathetic to the traditions of the north. There is revealing irony in the fact that a man of Shenoute's character, recommending the practices he did, could claim the heritage of Pachomius, from whom, in fact, he differed enormously both in spirit and in monastic discipline.[7]

Similar caution will temper our view of early Palestinian asceticism. Hilarion – supposedly a Palestinian pioneer, made famous by Jerome in a

[5] Binns (1994) 57f.

[6] For the phrase and its significance, together with appeal to the idiosyncratic character of church life in Scythopolis, see Binns (1994) 121f.

[7] Besa, *Vita Shenoudi* (*CSCO Script. Copt.* 16) 119, 123, 144, 173. Shenoute died at an extremely advanced age, probably in A.D. 466. A useful and fully documented account is provided by Elm (1994) 296–310.

brief and partly fictional *Life*, and founder of an ascetic settlement near Gaza – was a declared admirer of the Egyptian Antony. Epiphanius, later bishop of Salamis in Cyprus, had also been to Egypt, was inspired by Hilarion, and sowed the seeds of another community in the Gaza region. He continued (uncanonically) to maintain a close interest in Palestinian affairs. As the fourth century came to a close, an increasing number of ascetics had begun to leave Egypt, sometimes because of persecution but also sensing decline, abandoning in particular the more loosely structured settlements in Nitria and Scetis. Notable among them were Porphyry, the later bishop of Gaza (leaving in 377), Silvanus, originally from Palestine (leaving in 380), and Esaias (who left soon after 440 and did not die – again, near Gaza – until 489).

Such men may have preserved at least some Egyptian values in their new home, passing on stories and traditions to new companions and disciples.[8] Yet even older, according to tradition, was the career of Chariton, originally from Iconium in Asia Minor. As a 'foreigner', he is a fitting archetype of the enthusiastic pilgrims attracted in ever greater numbers by Palestine's growing status as the 'holy land', beautified and enriched by imperial generosity and aristocratic patronage.[9] He eventually settled further north than Gaza, first in country to the west of Jericho and then south of Jerusalem beyond Bethlehem, founding what came to be known as the Old Laura (Greek *laura*) or Souka (Syriac *shouqa*). These words have come to be associated with markets or bazaars, with their long, narrow streets of shops and stalls: thus, in the desert, a precipitous path wound past caves in the *wadi* walls, each housing its ascetic. They were not hermits in a strict sense, for the *laura* possessed also a communal church and a bakehouse, to which all repaired on Saturday, sharing in vigils and a meal of bread, vegetables and dates, and in the Sunday eucharist. Then, having collected fresh material for basket work and other crafts, and a further supply of food, they returned to their caves to work and pray alone during the other days of the week. In that early generation, therefore, most of the characteristics of Palestinian asceticism were set in place – economic as well as social: for its future prosperity depended for the most part on donations from novices, admirers and high-ranking patrons (chiefly in cash and food, more rarely in parcels of land), simple horticulture and handicraft contributing no more than a supplement.

Chariton is presented in hagiography as a rival, indeed a predecessor, of the Egyptian Antony; but his association with Asia Minor – reared as he

[8] Still the fundamental survey is that offered by Chitty (1966), which may now be supplemented by Gould (1993) and Binns (1994), although the latter may exaggerate Egyptian influence (157f.).

[9] Hirschfeld (1992) 2, 11, 71. For pilgrimage and Christian developments in fourth-century and fifth-century Palestine, see Hunt, *Holy Land Prilgrimage* and Walker, *Holy City, Holy Places?* The surviving biography of Chariton is late and has to be used with caution, since it may justify custom he never foresaw: see Garitte (1941) and the English translation by Di Segni in Wimbush (1990) 393–421.

was not far to the west of Basil's Cappadocia – brought Palestine into touch with quite another centre of fourth-century ascetic experiment. The great hero of Palestinian monasticism in the next century, Euthymius, came from the same part of the world – from Melitene, on the eastern fringe of Cappadocia: even more within the orbit of Basil and his associates. Before travelling south, he had served in the household of his local bishop, and had exercised some authority over nearby monasteries.[10] Several of his first disciples in Palestine had similar origins. That is not to suggest that he introduced Basilian monachism into Palestine – far from it: for he long subscribed to the *laura* pattern, developed an admiration for what he discovered of Egyptian asceticism, and was himself disposed to even greater withdrawal. (No more did the refugees from Egypt bring with them an unadulterated admiration for Pachomius, of whom, perhaps, many knew little.) Nevertheless, ascetic practice in Palestine from the beginning of the fifth century was open to influence from the north as well as the south, its original enthusiasms thus overlaid by patterns developed elsewhere.

That makes it a good place to observe the internal debates that came to enliven ascetic communities. In 411, Euthymius, who had been in Palestine since 405, established with his friend Theoctistus a *laura* in the Wadi el-Mukallik, which flows down to the Dead Sea from the Jerusalem–Jericho road.[11] He himself eventually settled in greater seclusion some 5 km distant. A contrast was thus established, and acquired the status of an ancient rule: Euthymius sent new recruits to Theoctistus, who introduced them to the principles of asceticism – 'humility and obedience' – in a tightly controlled and communal environment; only then were they allowed to graduate to a more isolated life. The experience of living in a community, numbering perhaps thirty or forty men, thus became an accepted part of the ascetic regime, even if regarded as preliminary to higher practice.[12] Conflict between the two disciplines was in that way avoided: both were to play their part within one system of personal development. Also involved was a distinctive relationship between master and disciple: Theoctistus dealt with admirers and dependants, while Euthymius enjoyed the luxury of secluded prayer.

In spite of Euthymius' enduring (though often frustrated) attachment to solitude, one should not underestimate the importance of the community

[10] Cyr. Scyth. *Vita Euthymii* 3f. The world of Euthymius and his successors, and of his biographer Cyril of Scythopolis, is vividly described by Hirschfeld (1992), with copious bibliography; see also Price (1991). (Cyril enjoyed a link of his own with Cappadocia and with Euthymius, through the latter's disciple Cosmas, who was consecrated bishop of Scythopolis in the late 460s.) Hirschfeld's account of diet, dress and furniture (82–101) is particularly relevant to later *cœnobia*; but his economic descriptions (102–11) make wide reference and point to a marked contrast with Egyptian monasticism in its Byzantine heyday.

[11] For what follows, see *V. Euthym.* 8f. For his Palestinian experience hitherto, conscious of Chariton but geared to productive labour and generosity, see 6f.

[12] Cyr. Scyth. *Vita Sabae* 7. One might compare the attitude of Shenoute, for whom solitude was a test of virtue and reunion with the *cœnobium* its reward: *V. Shen.* 38f.

within his system. Weekends were always shared with others; and a *laura* developed its own economy, requiring the supervision of a steward and his subordinates (bakers, cooks and storekeepers), who lived out their period of office within the communal buildings. The steward would oversee the collection and distribution of raw materials among the ascetics, and the marketing of their produce. In the more northern region, topography could also contribute to integration: for some of the *laurai* here (although not that of Theoctistus itself) were established on flatter ground and acquired more cohesion. Common prayer on Saturdays and Sundays encouraged complex rituals in well-furnished churches; a feature reinforced in monasteries built close to centres of pilgrimage (increasingly common in the Jericho region, close to the Jordan river). Euthymius wished his own retreat to become a *cœnobium* at his death – a wish fulfilled in 482.[13] Most striking of all, the regular movement from community to solitude was seen as compatible with a principle of stability: monks should avoid 'a feeling of resentment or loathing towards the place where we are and towards our companions'; and Euthymius retained a 'fear that our rule be subverted by change of place'. Nor did he lose entirely a readiness to share in the pastoral activities of the church, preaching to outsiders, baptizing, and collaborating with the local bishop – in every respect a precedent for later developments.[14]

Further south, near Gaza, Esaias exemplified the same pattern. He had lived in a *cœnobium* before moving to Scetis. After leaving Egypt, he shut himself up in a cell, while Peter, his disciple, dealt with visitors. Yet he was ready to legislate for more organized followers, and was not untouched by the controversies of the church in his day.[15] The pattern persisted. Severus, the later patriarch of Antioch, adopted a solitary life near Gaza but built also a monastery for his gathering admirers. A more formal stage, perhaps, is illustrated by the monastery of Gerasimus – another Asian arrival in Palestine, from Lycia. His *cœnobium*, built in the Jericho plain probably between A.D. 440 and 460, was actually sited in the midst of the cells of the *laura* itself, still with the function of training the less experienced.

Sabas, Euthymius' successor as the dominant monastic figure in Palestine, was originally from Argaeus, close to Basil's Caesarea. He first

[13] Chitty (1966) 102f.

[14] Community arrangements: *V. Euthym.* 17f. Liturgy: *V. Euthym.* 28f. (Note also the implications of 48; and compare *V. Sab.* 32, 36.) Own cell a *cœnobium*: *V. Euthym.* 39 (an ordered liturgy and hospitality to strangers were to be central). Stability: *V. Euthym.* 19, tr. Price (1991) 26. Pastoral responsibility: *V. Euthym.* 10, 12, 14f. Euthymius' habitual Lenten retreat finds an interesting and contemporary parallel in Eparchius of Clermont-Ferrand (Greg. Tur. *Hist.* II.21). The earliest monastic churches for which we have archaeological evidence were built no differently from those in settled centres, and seem designed to fulfil the same liturgical and pastoral needs: see Walters (1974) 34f.

[15] For convenience of reference, see Chitty (1966) 73f. and Chitty (1971); also Zacharias of Mitylene, *HE* (*CSCO Script. Syr.* 3, 5–6) V.9, VI.3.

practised asceticism, like Euthymius, in his native district, in a large and well-developed monastery. Again it was Jerusalem – just as in the case of Euthymius – that first attracted him to Palestine, rather than the Judaean desert. Like many before him, Euthymius sent him to be schooled by Theoctistus; and then he practised asceticism in a remoter cave. The description of his regime sums up the pattern of Palestinian practice: 'spending the day in physical labour and passing the night without sleep in giving praise to God, making humility and obedience the root and foundation of his life, and showing aptitude and great zeal in the office of the holy liturgy'.[16] Once he had attracted disciples of his own, he exercised over them an authority based predominantly on his own experience – the hallmark of the charismatic master in the north Egyptian tradition. He also acquired in time, however, a Theoctistus of his own – another Cappadocian, named Theodosius, with whom he divided authority. Theodosius, near Jerusalem, governed coenobites in the spirit of Basil, his fellow countryman. By this time, in the 470s, *cœnobia* were becoming established features of the desert fringe: extensive walled communities with refectories and dormitories for more than a hundred monks, together with accommodation for visitors and for the sick, the buildings added to decade by decade. A large church provided the setting not only for the eucharist but for regular hymns and psalms. Sabas, meanwhile, in his 'Great Laura', closer to the Dead Sea, commanded more scattered ascetics; but he also developed something akin to 'rules', which were general enough to be imposed upon later foundations as they were established. Here too, prayer as well as discipline was catered for, the monks in their weekday cells responding to the same signal that summoned their coenobitic colleagues.[17] So, while leading a life of some freedom and eccentricity, Sabas busied himself with the material details of an increasingly complex and prosperous empire. Patrons in Jerusalem were a source of regular funds; but he also travelled on two occasions to Constantinople, in A.D. 511–12 and 531, where he gained apparently easy access to the court, and returned with considerable wealth for his communities. His own Great Laura thus acquired a coenobitic offshoot, a hospital and a new church.[18]

When it came to relations with bishops, Palestinian monasticism had by this time adopted a style of administration peculiar to itself, reflecting in part the small scale of the desert region and its easy access to Jerusalem.[19] The patriarch of the city appointed one ascetic – Sabas being only the most

[16] *V. Sab.* 8, tr. Price (1991) 100. Earlier asceticism: *V. Sab.* 1f. First endeavours in Palestine: *V. Euthym.* 31; *V. Sab.* 7f.

[17] Authority: *V. Sab.* 16. Relations with Theodosius: *V. Sab.* 30, 65; *V. Jo. Hesych.* 6 (see Hirschfeld (1992) 15, and Binns (1994) 45). 'Rules': *V. Sab.* 42, 74, 76.

[18] *V. Sab.* 18, 25, 32; 27, 31, 35; 51f., 71f.; Patrich (1995).

[19] Emphasis on a close link between monks and church in Palestine is the chief mark of Binns (1994). On Jerusalem, see especially 80f., 178f.

famous – to be archimandrite (that is, overall superior) for all the monks of the diocese. The communities were thus bound to the patriarch in a single system. That was why Sabas was in such frequent contact with episcopal affairs: he was always willing to travel up to Jerusalem, not only to consult with the bishop but to lodge and dine with him and his associates, enjoying at least occasionally a comfort that may surprise us.

There had been, for a long time, ascetics in Jerusalem itself. That was inevitable, given the city's increasing importance as a centre of pilgrimage. The most famous were on the Mount of Olives, associated with the name of the elder Melania, and increasingly disdained by the less clerically orientated Jerome in Bethlehem. Melania encouraged hard work and reflective reading, in a style of which even Pachomius would have approved. The Jerusalem communities were marked also by a certain Basilian character (significantly attractive to ascetics for a time in this very city); a character associated not only with the proximity of the bishop but also with the numerous hostels built in Jerusalem, and with a related care for the poor. The *Life* of the younger Melania, who reached Jerusalem some forty years later, provides evidence that such traditions persisted over more than one generation. Gerontius, her biographer, may disappoint us by dwelling more on Melania's personal asceticism than on the details of her monastic ordinance. Yet she had obviously come to value the mutual respect and moderated self-denial encouraged by the common life, and set in place a detailed routine of liturgical prayer in her communities, which were built within the city. She also mixed easily with bishops and other churchmen.[20]

It was with that tradition of urban monasticism and episcopal patronage that Sabas was now associated (together with his colleague Theodosius), putting in place an even wider network of authority and dependence that drew city and desert together. The process was undoubtedly encouraged by the shifting allegiance of Jerusalem to the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451). The patriarch Juvenal lost, for a time, his authority, following ambiguous resistance to the decisions of the council; and he was replaced briefly by a monk. Returning with force in 453, Juvenal presided over a period of some antagonism between himself and ascetics. Euthymius quietly supported his authority, but was relatively isolated in doing so.[21] Elpidius and Gerontius, general archimandrites, took the opposing side. The situation was resolved only with the accession of Martyrius as patriarch in 478, which represented a victory for the clergy – a victory that Sabas was willing to accept. Esaias

[20] *Vita Melaniae* 36, 40f. Melania had already set up monastic houses for both men and women during a stay in Africa, under the shadow of another bishop and ascetic legislator, Augustine. In that instance, Gerontius is frustratingly vague (perhaps he knew less) (22f.) but mentions (among the women) reading, fasting, prayer and spiritual direction. Augustine's own enterprises will be discussed below. Gerontius himself was later to achieve prominence in the very same *milieu*.

[21] *V. Euthym.* 27. For events in Jerusalem meanwhile, see 28f.

of Scetis and others, correspondingly, withdrew to Gaza.[22] By that time, no doubt, the growing willingness of desert ascetics to give the *cœnobium* permanent status, the fact that many more of them remained within community walls than graduated to the more independent life of a personal cell, and the associated emphasis on carefully preserved property and growing liturgical sophistication, all gave the episcopate an increasing foothold in monastic circles. Perhaps nothing symbolized the growing liaison more than the feeling among Sabas' followers that he could not exercise effective leadership unless he were ordained a priest.[23] That ordination was achieved by subterfuge in 490; and Sabas succeeded as general archimandrite in 492.

Three features of ascetic experience, therefore, became obvious in Palestine: submission to the episcopate, a carefully controlled hierarchy of masters and disciples, and a calculated encouragement of the community life. While remaining capable of sustaining a variety of styles, the Palestinian regime betrayed an openness to church life, not only in its subjection to episcopal authority, but also in the associated complexity of its liturgical celebrations, and in its willingness to undertake the conversion and pastoral care of people beyond its immediate boundaries.

When we move further north, to Syria proper, and in particular to the country around Antioch, the scene appears to change. Our chief source of information for the first part of our period (and, indeed, reaching back beyond it) is Theodoret, bishop of Cyrrhus and author of an *Historia religiosa*, which describes the lives of prominent Syrian ascetics. His most famous subject is undoubtedly Symeon Stylites; and Symeon and his imitators, bizarre and extreme in their ascetic discipline, have tended to dominate the imagination of later readers.[24] Yet very few of Theodoret's vignettes depict such lives; and the careful reader soon discerns both the anxieties of a bishop and the persistent influence of the coenobitic life. The Syrian church had long been rigorist and demanding in its view of Christian commitment, probably owing little in the process to anything but it own reflection upon the gospel. It was at the same time intensely devoted to the notion of community and to the authority of the bishop; and it would be surprising to find any contrary emphasis from the pen of one of its leading churchmen. In story after story, Theodoret refers to the coenobitic background of his heroes. He gives full details of a coenobitic regime, with reference to the liturgy of monks, their reception of guests ('the divine work of hospitality'), their general order and hard work.[25] He

[22] Zach. *HE* III.4, VI.1; John Eph. *Lives* 25. See Binns (1994) 189f.

[23] *V. Sab.* 19. Hirschfeld sees Sabas' promotion as a victory for the desert ascetics ((1992) 14f.); but it was achieved at a price.

[24] Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Historia religiosa* XXVI. For Symeon, see the texts translated and introduced by Robert Doran (1992). The *Life* of Daniel the Stylite is also of interest (trans. in Dawes and Baynes, (1977)).

[25] Theod. *HR* (*SChrét.* 234) II.5, III.2, 12, V.2, X.3 (liturgy); III.14, 20 (quoted), VIII.2, X.4f (guests); III.22, X.2 (general).

reveals, in a pattern now familiar, the development from a holy man's solitary cell, through the attraction of disciples, to the establishment of a clear coenobitic regime.[26] Yet – and here is a Syrian feature that will recur – small groups that were gathered around a master continued to subdivide the larger communities.[27]

Ascetics also maintained a close relationship with society at large. Theodoret was anxious to emphasize that proximity to village life was no impediment to ascetic virtue.[28] Archaeological and epigraphic evidence corroborates the impression that monastic communities, like ecclesiastical sites in general, gradually acquired in Syria a central place in the rural economy, in both alluvial and mountainous country, either by association with a village or villages or by inclusion within an extensive estate. In the sixth century, under the influence of growing Monophysite confidence, churches and hostels of increasing size and grandeur catered for popular devotion, while extensive farm buildings, often some distance from the monastery itself, reached out into cultivated land. Cereal crops provided for monastic and local needs; but the extensive cultivation of olives points to sale and trade on a considerable scale.[29] There is no reason to suppose that the process was not under way in Theodoret's time, although many of the earliest monastic communities in Syria failed to maintain themselves in the century that followed – reflecting in part the contemporary shifts in theological loyalty but also, perhaps, the growing need to develop sites more conducive to agricultural exploitation and pastoral accessibility. Theodoret himself welcomed, certainly, a degree of social and even pastoral concern among monks,[30] and reported without surprise that it was from ascetic society that bishops were often drawn.[31]

He was ready on several occasions to interfere directly in the lives of monks, precisely in order to preserve communal discipline and to criticize idiosyncrasy or self-will. His approach was not always welcomed, and he could find himself puzzled by some of the practices he discovered.[32] His treatment of Symeon was particularly charged with hesitation, tempered only partly by the popularity of the man, which he clearly found hard to explain or accept. Symeon, after all, had first practised asceticism in a coenobitic setting, had proved constantly disobedient and disruptive, and

[26] Theod. *HR* II.3, III.4, V.3, VI.13, X.3. A static distinction between two states is very rare: XXVII.1. Compare *V. Sab.* 35. [27] Theod. *HR* II.6, IV.5. [28] Theod. *HR* IV.1, XIV.2, 5, XXV.1.

[29] See expecially Tchalenko, *Villages* I (in which specifically monastic references are interwoven with other material), and the Appendix by André Caquot, an invaluable gazetteer with bibliography (*Villages* III.63–106).

[30] Theod. *HR* I.7, XXII.7; and IV.4, 8f. XVII.3 is rare in its 'mediating' or 'patronal' authority. This is the context of Peter Brown's famous analysis, 'The rise and function of the Holy Man' (1971), which is taken by Palmer ((1990) 107f.) to apply also in the Tur 'Abdin. Clearly, there are anecdotes which support the view; but a coenobitic and, indeed, pastoral context is almost always implied: see Rousseau (1995). [31] Theod. *HR* II.9, III.5, V.8, X.9, XVII.1, 8. [32] Theod. *HR* XXI.10f., 33, XXII.6.

remained, even after his departure, surprisingly restless.[33] Theodoret came to regard him as an unwelcome competitor in the exercise of public and spiritual authority. He unhesitatingly used his subordinates to counter that influence, and was grudging in his regard for the stylite, quick to hint that many others might share his disapproval. If we take Theodoret as a guide, therefore, we have to believe that in Syria, too, the communal life was gaining some ascendancy, under the increasing watchfulness of episcopal authority, even while the old loyalties of master and disciple, as in Palestine, were far from fading.

Taking Palestine and Syria together, therefore, it becomes clear that, by the middle of the fifth century, a principle espoused by the Council of Chalcedon was already on its way to acceptance over a wide area of the eastern empire (and, as we shall see, much the same could be said of the west). Monasteries – whatever the word might imply in this or that situation – were to be subject to bishops, at least at their foundation and in their external relations. Ascetics were not to wander from place to place, at the risk of their reputation, but to stay in one community, devoting themselves to fasting and prayer.[34] That monastic preoccupation had gradually eclipsed (largely because it had absorbed) an older world of virgins and widows, independent enthusiasts, and the urban households of a pious élite. The prescriptions of Chalcedon were also drawn up in the context of religious controversy; and we have to note the extent to which, by that time, ascetics of various sorts had been drawn into the conflicts surrounding Nestorius and Dioscorus. Such involvement contributed in no small degree to making the monasteries an integral part of the episcopal world. In Palestine, the conduct of Euthymius, Saba and their associates had been closely controlled by their attitude to Chalcedon and to the religious policies of the emperors Zeno and Anastasius. In addition, however, to disturbances in Jerusalem, there was widespread monastic unrest in Antioch (particularly during the time of Severus, appointed patriarch in 512), and even more in Alexandria, where alliance between desert and city dated back to the days of Theophilus and Cyril.

All that helps to explain how we pass from the world of Pachomius and Basil to that of Theodoret and Sabas. The great fourth-century pioneers of ascetic discipline might maintain their influence as writers of 'rules', not least as translated into Latin by Jerome and Rufinus; but territorially the centre of ascetic gravity had shifted away from the Nile and from Pontus and Cappadocia. The rise of Jerusalem was one factor, already noted; the other was the corresponding importance of Constantinople – not only a

[33] For this and what follows, see Theod. *HR* xxvi, esp. 12, 14f., 23.

[34] Council of Chalcedon, canon 4, Hefele and Leclercq (1907–) II.2: 779. The council's stipulations marked a climax in a longer process: bishops were held responsible for ascetics, in the Theodosian Code, as early as A.D. 398: *C.Th.* IX.40.16.

new capital for the empire but a capital almost built around the piety, even the ascetic piety, of its imperial family.[35] Indeed, the irregularities that Chalcedon was intent upon controlling were most obviously prevalent in the capital itself.

It was in some ways exceptional. As the city had gained prominence during the fourth century, so its religious life became at once more significant and more idiosyncratic. The monks of the city were as much newcomers as any other citizen, unabashed fortune-seekers from elsewhere in the empire, cut loose from the controlling bonds of their own communities, and vigorously opposed to the influence and privilege of clergy in the city. Both John Chrysostom and Nestorius were famously disadvantaged by that conflict.[36] From the beginning, in the 380s, ascetics in Constantinople acquired political supporters among the secular élite. Palladius' *Lausiac History*, written around A.D. 420, both reflected and supported that bid, illustrating what had been, since the time of Evagrius, a long-running infiltration of the educated and governing classes in the east by ascetic devotees.[37] The career of Eutyches in the 440s, protected not least by his association with the powerful eunuch Chrysaphius, followed a pattern to be repeated through many reigns to follow, most famously that of Justinian. It was a far cry from the remote rigour of Pontus or the Thebaid. Ascetics in the capital also took unscrupulous advantage of the notorious piety of the empress and her sister-in-law, just as Palestinians did later, when Eudocia was in self-imposed exile after 443. The result was undoubtedly a loss of discipline, quite belied by the seemingly ordered and uninterrupted liturgy of the *Acoemitae*, the 'Sleepless Ones', probably the most famous but least typical of Constantinople's ascetic communities. It was the ambitious, more numerous and less predictable groups that Chalcedon wished to bring under control: the bishops knew h ow disproportionate and unhealthy their influence had been in the years during and since the Council of Ephesus (A.D. 431). Once, of course, prohibitions and regulations had been set in place, the control and even theological condemnation of 'wandering' ascetics became firmly embedded in the legislative agenda of the church.[38]

One of our richest sources of information about eastern developments in the following century remains the *Lives of the Eastern Saints* by John of Ephesus, written probably between A.D. 566 and 568. One may find this surprising, given John's dedication to the Monophysite cause, which might

[35] For the broader background, see Dagron, *Naissance*; Krautheimer (1983); Holum, *Empresses*; and McCormick, *Eternal Victory*. Useful light is shed on the temper of the court by Cameron (1982).

[36] For a succinct account of the earliest monks in Constantinople see Dagron (1970). A great range of detail is provided by Janin (1969): essentially a religious gazetteer of the city, covering the whole Byzantine period, it offers a considerable bibliography and many allusions to development and practice.

[37] Context and bibliography are provided by Clark (1992).

[38] See, for example, texts cited in Jones, *LRE* II (1973) 1389 n. 160, to which add Justinian, *Nov.* 79 of A.D. 539, and, in the west, the Council of Orleans (A.D. 511), canon 22.

prompt one to expect a regime at once tainted by heretical association and cut off from the mainstream of Christian development. There is no doubt that the history of monasticism in the sixth-century east was wholly interwoven with the progress of the Monophysite controversy. Monks were at once the most influential leaders of the heretical cause and the most revered victims of orthodox persecution. Shifts of government policy under Zeno and Anastasius, and indeed during the reign of Justinian himself, had a constantly disruptive effect on the practice of the ascetic life – exile, polemic and pastoral concern being the order of the day. Nothing can blind us to the fact, however, that significant numbers (perhaps the majority) of Chrisitans in the eastern empire were willing to accommodate themselves in some degree to the Monophysite party; and only orthodox prejudice can lead one to believe that the Palestinian *laura* had become a dominant model. The majority of the ascetics described by John were certainly from Syria and certainly Monophysite in their loyalty; but his account ranges fully over a great crescent from Thrace to the Nile, and presents us with an image of monastic practice adopted throughout the eastern provinces of the empire.

A recurrent pattern is easy to discern. Each monastery had its archimandrite, and its 'rule' in the sense of customary order: there can be no doubt that, in John's day, that had become the norm, with complex buildings, regular hours and a highly developed liturgy. More than once, he admires explicitly fine craftsmanship in monastic buildings, and the sumptuousness of their church furniture.[39] A monastery, however, would still bear the stamp and often the name of the holy man who had found it. The process of coenobitic development was still based on an original master and the gradual accretion of disciples.[40] Other patterns occurred: the Palestinian rhythm, by which one graduated from community to solitary life; and the development of increasingly ordered forms of devotion among pious families. Within each community – a custom hinted at by Theodoret – masters could still preside over groups of disciples, and even transfer with them to other places. More experienced ascetics practised isolated programmes of self-denial, not always approved of by their peers, but initiated by their own enthusiasm, and carried out in corners and at odd hours of the day or night. Such anecdotes add a voice to the jumbled ground-plan of cells and courtyards revealed by monastic archaeology.[41] John's chief point was to stress

[39] John Eph. *Lives* 4, 7, 12, 14, 17f., 20, 31, 33, 35, 42, 47. 9, 12 and 58 give particularly full accounts of buildings and their appointments. For a general survey, see Harvey, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis*. An excellent summary of John's descriptions of the monastic regime is given by Palmer (1990) 81–8; and his book as a whole provides a superb example (the monastery of Qartmin in south-east Turkey) that illustrates, in archaeology and in associated documents, many aspects of Syrian asceticism in this period. Janin's provincial survey (1975), covering large areas of Greece and Asia, offers again a richly documented gazetteer.

[40] John Eph. *Lives* 5f., 22, 27, 34, 54.

[41] The narrative is vividly corroborated by the remains at Qartmin: see Palmer (1990) 97–107.

the way in which the community enfolded those endeavours (even that of stylites), and enjoyed priority of merit. Communities remained open, also, valuing both hospitality and the care of the poor.[42] On the fringes of that ordered world, John described wandering ascetics and radically pious lay persons (in this context women come to greater prominence),[43] who also devoted much of their practical energy to the care of the sick and the poor, and to the entertainment of travellers and strangers.[44] Over all presided the bishop – one of John's chief motives was to show that bishops, also, could be holy! So they exercised their authority over monasteries, characterized as they were by attachment to a sacramental life.[45]

Two things strike one about these vivid accounts. First, monastic order was not an end in itself. One did not base one's life on loyalty to a specific written rule or even to a permanent community. The fundamental social component of the ascetic life was still the relationship between master and disciple. The reputation of the master was the stimulus for the formation and organization of the community in the first place; and the master's own practice and advice was the factor that did most to control the ambition and behaviour of his associates. The monastery and its habitual order were the extended instrument, or at least the protective setting, of a master's formative power. That was why a life governed by 'rules' could still acknowledge some dependence on the biographical tradition enshrined in the *Sayings of the Fathers* and its later supplements and imitations. Second, the *cœnobium/laura* relationship observed in Palestine had now entered a new phase, in that the *laura* had come to live in the *cœnobium*. Within a domestic setting that catered for a communal life, men who were psychologically, as it were, hermits pursued in private a programme of prayer and self-discipline within the communal buildings themselves. At the root of the whole enterprise one discovers two fundamental motives: a fear of judgement and a compassion for the unfortunate. The first engendered an urgent sense of responsibility for the direction of one's own life; the second encouraged mercy for others, equally subject not so much to economic or physical misfortune as to a disappointment or weakness entirely like one's own.

Such were the perceptions that did most to shape the structure of eastern monastic life in the fifth and sixth century. Such, also, were the adaptations visited upon the heritage of Pachomius and Basil. The monastic life continued in Asia Minor – the youthful experience of Euthymius and Sabas bears witness to that – even though Constantinople and

[42] From community to solitude: John Eph. *Lives* 6 (though in conjunction with other processes), 16, 29 (in which solitaries seek winter refuge in communities). Pious families: 21, 56. (A splendid history of more general character is provided in 58.) Masters and disciples: 2, 3, 15, 29, 32f., 35. Eccentricity within the community: 11, 17, 36, 54. Stylites: 2, 4 (and see the example provided by Palmer (1990) 105f.). Community more meritorious: 3 (very forceful), 4, 13, 15, 19. External relations: 2, 5, 13, 17, 29, 31, 33, 44. [43] John Eph. *Lives* 12, 27f., 54. [44] John Eph. *Lives* 31, 39, 45f., 52f., 57.
[45] John Eph. *Lives* 2, 4, 12, 16, 25.

Jerusalem had begun to exert their disturbing pull.[46] In Egypt, where the outlook of Shenoute had modified Pachomian tradition, and where Monophysite self-confidence was less severely disturbed and capable of more organic development, the physical aspects of monastic life in the Delta and along the Nile were quite startlingly changed, precisely in ways that Pachomius had foreseen and feared.[47] Rambling walled *cœnobia* (like Shenoute's 'White Monastery' near Atripe), more populous and more prosperous than before, lay now at the centre of great estates, absorbing the energies of the monks themselves, and providing employment for local peasants. They offered material support in time of famine and unrest, and taxable wealth for the imperial government (which was often returned to them by donation or remission).[48] They were drawn, as a result, into the economy of the church as a whole, sharing under episcopal supervision in the increasing prosperity of the Christian community generally.

In the matter of legislative development, a distinction seems evident between east and west. At the opening of the fifth century, the eastern provinces had already begun to acquire the detailed traditions of order that were to dominate monasticism in the Greek church and its satellites for long afterwards. In the west, on the other hand, the rule that seems most to have influenced later centuries, that of Benedict, would not take shape for a century or more. The distinction, however, is unreal. 'The Rule of Pachomius' or 'the Rule of Basil' did not exist in a hard-and-fast form. The Pachomian material translated into Latin by Jerome did not form a single, coherent corpus; and it is unlikely that such regulations were at any time honoured throughout the coenobitic communities of the Nile valley. Some even of Pachomius' own foundations seceded from his federation soon after his death. The ease with which Shenoute usurped the Pachomian mantle was itself a sign of how diffuse and even insecure his legacy had become. Other collections of rules gained competing influence. Several items in the *Sayings of the Fathers* fall into sequences that are virtually rules in embryo.[49] The *Sayings* focus also on figures like Longinus, superior of the

[46] The flourishing establishments in Basil's Caesarea were sadly depleted by the time of his successor Firmus, a century later. See Firmus, *Letters* (*SChrét.* 250) esp. *Epp.* 12 and 43. John Eph. *Lives* 31 describes another species of Basilian *Nachleben* in sixth-century Melitene, on the eastern borders of Cappadocia.

[47] For the tenuous survival of old north-Egyptian traditions, see Chitty (1966) 144f., and Gould (1993) 9f., 185f.

[48] The generosity of patrons, in a society where wealth meant either land and its produce or gold, was thus locked firmly into the local beneficence of hospitality and welfare. The work of Jones and, more recently, Hendy provides a general context and access to a wide international bibliography. Much recent work of an economic nature has focused more on the third and fourth centuries. Useful detail can still be found in Johnson and West (1949) especially 66f. Walters (1974) discusses surviving material evidence of refectories, bakeries and water installations, 99f, 206f., 209f. and 219f., with additional reference at this last point to handicraft and to labour outside the monastery.

[49] For example Moses, 14–18. Such prescriptive dialogues could find their way into narrative sources: see John Eph. *Lives* 3.

Ennaton, a large Delta monastery with Pachomian roots. Esaias of Scetis, another generator and hero of such anecdotes, was not averse to drawing up rules. He clearly worked in the Pachomian tradition, even though he sprang from the exiled northern communities of Egypt that probably created the *Sayings* themselves. As for Basil, his *Regulae* circulated at first in at least two collections, each subject to editing and accretion. They are notable for saying less about monastic institutions than about the development of the ascetic's spiritual life, or else were designed to meet particular needs and to answer particular questions as they arose.[50] The memory of such pioneers survived among the communities they inspired largely because of their personal reputation, enhanced in Pachomius' case by a rich biographical tradition. It may be that the greater influence of Basil was due precisely to his lesser specificity, the detailed prescriptions of Pachomius' actual rules being more difficult to transfer unchanged to other settings. So, even on paper, individual character continued to count for most: one was loyal to reputations as much as to regimes. Wherever a 'rule' does seem discernible, we find constantly an eclectic tendency: ascetics did not adopt the practice of one particular place, whether Caesarea or the Thebaid, but reinforced the customs and recollections of more immediate instructors, or, at the very most, responded admiringly to the wisdom of some figure in the more distant past. Sabas was to prove, in a way that applied to a multitude of monasteries, a typical example: he bequeathed, in A.D. 532, written instructions to his successor; but they represented not one authority but 'the traditions handed down in his monasteries' – only at that late stage, perhaps, committed to writing.[51]

Yet there were developments proper to the west, governed to some extent by precedents in its own provinces. Before the translated *Life of Antony* could gain widespread effect, and certainly before Jerome and Rufinus began to offer the west their own ascetic works and translations, bishops in particular were beginning to make formal prescriptions for ascetic disciples. Eusebius of Vercelli (died 371) and Ambrose of Milan (died 397) are famous examples. Episcopal initiative and control were important features of the development: in some cases, indeed, the bishop's household became the centre of the ascetic endeavour, with the inevitable involvement of members of his clergy. Jerome and Rufinus were, indeed, products of that world; and Augustine (A.D. 354–430) continued the tradition.

His towering stature within the western Christian tradition can often encourage us to forget how local Augustine could be in his initial influence; and that is particularly true of his monastic experiments. Suspicions

[50] See Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea* 354f. and Gribomont (1953).
[51] Cyr. Scyth. *V. Sab.* 76, tr. Price (1991) 191.

aroused in Gaul by his doctrine of grace, at least in the 420s and 430s, and the alternative prestige of Lérins and its satellites no doubt help to explain why his ascetic writings and regulations were slow to make their mark outside North Africa. It is in later ascetic writers – Caesarius, Benedict and Gregory the Great – that his ideas can be more readily detected.[52] Nevertheless, while the earliest relevant texts do suggest a narrow audience and confused compilation, Augustine could justly claim to have been the first monastic legislator of the west. His 'rule' in its primitive form, the so-called *Ordo monasterii*, was probably written, perhaps in collaboration with others in his circle, at the beginning of the 390s, when Jerome and Rufinus had yet to make known to the west the works of Pachomius and Basil. Augustine was living at the time in a community at Thagaste, which he had founded when he returned to Africa from Italy after 388. He undoubtedly set the tone of the 'rule' in the opening section of what was otherwise a laconic document, emphasizing love of God and neighbour. A cycle of prayer and work was broken by a period of reading and a late afternoon meal. Goods were to be held in common, but there was commerce with the outside world. Obedience was demanded within a hierarchy of *pater* and *praepositus*.[53] Augustine's models had been inspired by the east, but were Italian in origin: he imbibed the tradition at second hand. He also placed the ascetic endeavour firmly within the context of the church as a whole. Finally, he developed his devotion to the monastic life alongside his famous sensibility to what he regarded as the weakness and complexity of the human psyche: destined for eternal fulfilment, but needing guidance and authority.

Once established in Hippo in 391, Augustine developed his ideas for a monastery entirely his own, producing his *Praeceptum*. He attached characteristic importance to the pattern of life followed by the first Christians in Jerusalem, as portrayed in Acts. The original church was the perfect monastery, with property held in common, and intense affection among its members. Given the variety of ability characteristic of human experience, the only way to maintain that 'unity of heart and soul' was to develop a sense of responsibility for other people, acknowledging dependence upon the virtuous, and rallying to the aid of the weak. A system of superiors still monitored behaviour, but in collaboration with the community and for the community's sake, conscious always of their own vulnerability in the sight of God. At the same time, the 'rule' had an authority of its own, being read aloud each week. Prayer was clearly ordered, although the opportunity for private reflection was still safeguarded, according to the Egyptian tradition.

[52] All three will be dealt with below. Caesarius' *Statuta* 21 (*Quæ aliquid*) is a striking example: compare Aug. *Praec.* 1.5f., III.3f. The relevant Augustinian texts are edited by Verheijen (1967).

[53] Love: Aug. *Ordo* 1. Routine: 2f; see also 9. Common property: 4. External relations: 8. Obedience: 6.

As we would expect of Augustine, obedience in such a world was at once the exercise and the guarantee of true freedom, not mere submission to a law.[54] The contrast with developments in Gaul will be striking. Instead of a monk who later became a bishop, we have a bishop who was learning more and more what it meant to be a monk. The redeeming security and necessary order of the church provided the model for the monastic life; and its function as the household of God was as important as the structures of authority within it. That social emphasis and reflective skill meant that Augustine's influence would transform any preoccupation with daily order and obedience; and it was to be in the *Rule* of Benedict that the coalition was finally most perfectly achieved.

Perhaps the most famous 'monk-bishop' of an earlier generation was Martin of Tours (died A.D. 397).[55] In Gaul itself (he was actually born on the Danube frontier), he appears to have been something of a monastic pioneer, although he had depended as a young man on encouragement by Hilary of Poitiers (died A.D. 367). The *Life* of Martin by Sulpicius Severus, written around the time of its hero's death, and the same author's *Dialogues*, written a few years later, present us with a vivid though highly tendentious account. Drawing upon eastern sources, both literary and anecdotal, Sulpicius' descriptions of Martin's ascetic regime may depend as much on the models he admired as on the reports he received. Nevertheless, he provides us with good reason to believe that some form of organized, communal asceticism was in place in the region of Poitiers and Tours by the 360s. After his consecration, Martin continued to live a visibly ascetic life (to the horror of some churchmen), to retreat at times to his own foundations, and to maintain supervision of their progress. Structures appear to have been loose, each ascetic living in a simple cabin or cave. There is allusion to literary interests, supporting, perhaps, a pastoral and anti-heretical impulse; but details are sketchy.[56] Martin's subsequent influence was largely restricted to the western parts of Gaul. He may have awakened interest in Britain and Ireland; but there is little evidence that his cult, for all its popularity and prestige both north and south, was accompanied, at least in the Gallic cities where it took root, by a specific and corresponding enthusiasm for anything that could be described as Martinian monasticism.

Of greater importance were developments in south-eastern Gaul, in the Rhône valley and around Marseilles. Here the pioneer was Honoratus, who, with the encouragement of Leontius, bishop of Fréjus, founded a

[54] Influence of Acts: Aug. *Praec.* I.2f., III.3f., IV.8. Superiors: VII.1f. 'Rule': VIII.2. Prayer: II.1f; the continuum of each ascetic's inner life was never ignored, III.2. Obedience: VIII.1 (the point had already been made briefly in the *Ordo* 10f.).

[55] Still the most authoritative account of asceticism in Gaul is that of Prinz (1965).

[56] Most of the information is in Sulpicius Severus, *V. Mart.* X. Maintaining earlier asceticism: 1f. Regular retreats to Marmoutier: 3f. Cabins or caves: 5. Literary pursuits: 6, and note reference to monks as future bishops: 8f. For Hilary, V.1f., and churchmen's horror, IX.3.

monastery on the island of Lérins (between Cannes and Antibes), and later became bishop of Arles (in A.D. 426). Honoratus had previously travelled in the east, perhaps even in Egypt and Syria; and he brought to his Gallic foundation the practices he observed or learnt of on his journey. This transference of eastern ideas was more direct than in the case of Martin. Although we have little certain textual evidence of the earliest regime at Lérins itself – it is likely that the canons of monastic practice were committed to writing only gradually – it is clear that a regular round of work and prayer, a system that included both coenobites and solitaries, and a detailed pattern of government under a designated superior were quickly established according to eastern models.[57] As the century progressed, a whole series of *regulae* began to appear, some in the Rhône valley, some across the Alps, almost all linked with Lérins to some degree, and all indebted to the heritage of Pachomius and Basil. Thus there sprang into being on western soil a stream of ideas and practices that would flow eventually into the prescriptions of Caesarius in Arles and of Benedict and his predecessors in Italy.[58]

From that same south-eastern Gallic milieu come the writings of John Cassian, an easterner by origin, who, after extensive travels in Palestine and Egypt, had settled in Gaul and had, by *c.* 415, founded two monasteries near Marseilles. For his own monks and for other communities already beginning to grow nearby (including that of Honoratus at Lérins), he wrote his *Institutes* and *Conferences*, which were greatly honoured and not infrequently imitated in the centuries to follow. In practical matters, the *Institutes* concentrated on the admission of novices and on the round of daily prayer. The singing of psalms at evening and in the night hours now became more ordered, with a split between 'nocturns' proper and a dawn service of disputed character, reflecting an amalgamation of Egyptian and Palestinian practice, but carried to a new level of formality. And instead of leaving the daylight hours to personal reflection (*meditatio*), brief 'offices' that we now know as 'terce', 'sext' and 'none' provided a more rigid and spaced-out framework. Enduring vagueness and obscurity, however, remind us that traditions had yet to congeal into patterns familiar to Benedict a century later.[59]

Cassian prescribed otherwise very little. It seems that he felt his duty was more to describe and gently recommend eastern practices, leaving his readers (at first envisaged as potential superiors themselves) to decide how

[57] Hilary's *Life* of Honoratus (something of a misnomer) provides a little institutional information. Adalbert de Vogüé (1982) argued with vigour that the so-called 'Rule of the Four Fathers' was the rule operating at Lérins from the earliest days. Its connection with the monastery appears to be beyond doubt; but its date is much less easily discovered.

[58] There can be no doubt that, in spite of difficulties in matters of dating and dependence, the account of this tradition given by De Vogüé (1982) is the most cohesive and appealing currently available.

[59] Concerning novices, *De institutis* (*CSEL* 17) I discusses the symbolism of a monk's clothing and IV.1–7 the experience of renouncing the world. The round of prayer: II and III.

those might best be imitated. They were to govern, in any case, more by example than by rule.[60] The bulk of the *Inistitutes* (Books v–xii) was devoted to spiritual guidance, under the headings of eight vices and how they might best be countered. The *Conferences* were similar in effect, reporting conversations with well-known ascetics of northern Egypt: offering, in other words, instruction from the lips of ascetic masters. Where Cassian did discuss relations between superiors and subjects, his emphasis was on formation – on the desire of the disciple and the wisdom of the teacher. The setting evoked, moreover, was predominantly eremitical: the solitary life was still acknowledged as the ascetic's characteristic ideal. There can be no doubt, nevertheless, that Cassian's intentions, like his audience, were coenobitic, and that the virtues and practices he encouraged were those proper to community life.[61] It is one of his claims to genius that he was able to respect an ancient Egyptian tradition, while nevertheless adapting it thoroughly to the new monasteries of Gaul. Thus the apparent conversations of old masters were transformed into an independently available text with an authority of its own.[62]

Once in place, those southern experiments and precedents set the tone for monasticism in Gaul until the end of the sixth century. (They also provided a context for interaction between Gaul, Britain and Ireland: Patrick was to some degree a disciple of Honoratus.)[63] Yet the close relationship between ascetics and the episcopate in Gaul, already evident in Cassian's career,[64] makes it difficult to assess the significance of specifically monastic developments in the province. Lérins quickly became a virtual school for bishops – not only of Arles, as in the case of Honoratus and his successor Hilary (died 449), but of several other dioceses: Eucherius' Lyons, for example, and the Riez of Faustus.[65] Such promotions did not represent merely enthusiasm for ascetic candidates, 'common assumption' though their suitability might have been.[66] The acquisition of a see depended as much on the patronage of the powerful, and reflected new aristocratic ambitions within an increasingly isolated province.[67] The men concerned

[60] Cassian, *Inst.* preface 4f., confirmed in *Conlationes* (*CSEL* 13) preface to i. *Inst.* iv.17–18 discusses food.

[61] That emphasis becomes more and more evident as the *Conferences* proceed, but is heavily accentuated in xix.

[62] Cassian, *Con.* prefaces to xi and xviii. Adaptation to the west: *Inst.* i.10.

[63] Although it was not as a monk that he journeyed to Ireland and worked there.

[64] His prefaces in the *Institutes* and *Conferences* bear witness to a complex web of relationships; and he had come to Gaul in the first place under the patronage of Proculus of Arles. See Rousseau, *Ascetics* 174f., 217f.

[65] Sid. Ap. *Ep.* 6.1.3; 9.3.4. Lérins was not the only source of such recruits. Rusticius of Narbonne, whose episcopate spanned more than thirty years (from A.D. 427), was a monk from St Victor, one of Cassian's foundations in Marseilles. It was to him that Jerome wrote, recommending an ascetic career as the visible guarantee of worthiness for the priesthood: *Ep.* 125.17.

[66] *Familiaris . . . præsumptio*: Boniface of Rome, *Ep. 'Exigit dilectio'*, *PL* xx.669f.

[67] See Mathisen (1989), (1993), and Drinkwater and Elton, *Fifth-Century Gaul.*

were members of the social and political élite; and that counted for as much as their ascetic experience. The notorious conflict between Ravennius of Arles, for example, and Theodore of Fréjus, fostered by the recalcitrant independence of Faustus, abbot of Lérins before he became bishop of Riez, hints at more than a debate between priests and monks. Their testy relations with Leo, the bishop of Rome, add to the implications.[68]

We are dealing here with attitudes and events that lie outside the narrow sphere of ascetic history and acquire their clearest significance in relation to post-imperial politics. Yet those developments had a direct and perhaps damaging effect on monastic practice: for the ambitious bishops who thus retained some trace of monastic formation played out the rest of their careers, and exercised their enduring patronage of monastic foundations, within the cities over which they came virtually to rule. Caesarius, in the next century, belonged very much, as we shall see, in that world (the monastery governed by his sister Caesaria was built, eventually, in the heart of Arles);[69] and what we read later in the pages of Gregory of Tours bears witness to the survival not only of Caesarius' own prescriptions but of a bond between bishop and monk that far outweighed in Gregory's mind any independence among ascetic institutions. Aurelianus of Arles and Ferreolus of Uzès are perfect examples of the trend.[70] The urban monasteries patronized by Frankish royalty were built on the same species of opportunism: their founders, whether religious or lay, indulged their piety as one means among others of reinforcing their hold over cities and their *territoria*. Partly in the service of that development, heroic solitaries in the old style, still gathering about themselves loyal disciples, were sucked into an ecclesiastical system with more on its agenda than abstemious self-discipline.

The period between Caesarius and Cassian, punctuated as it is by the *regulæ* already referred to, can be brought to life in even greater detail by a collection of lives devoted to the 'Fathers of the Jura', Romanus, Lupicinus and Eugendus, successive abbots of Condat and its associated houses in the upper reaches of the Rhône valley system.[71] These three lives present us with a transition from the virtual isolation of Romanus in his early years to the highly ordered community of Eugendus, recognizably similar to the monastery of his contemporary Caesarius (and, indeed, of Benedict and

[68] *Concilia Galliae A. 314–A. 506* ed. C. Munier (*CCSL* 149) 132f. Faustus became bishop of Riez some ten years later, after more than twenty-five years as abbot, and died *c.* A.D. 490. The details of this controversy are treated fully by Mathisen (1989) 173–205; see especially 195f. In this particular instance (A.D. 451), the bishop of Fréjus was specifically warned to keep his nose out of the monastery's internal affairs: a stipulation that modified significantly the exactly contemporary strictures of Chalcedon.

[69] *Vita sancti Cæsarii* (trans. W. Klingshirn, Liverpool, 1994) 1.28 and 35. Aurelianus, his later successor (A.D. 546–51), followed his example: see following note.

[70] For texts and references, see Desprez (1980).

[71] The biographies cover the period from *c.* 435 to the death of Eugendus in 510, and were probably written shortly after that date. Romanus died *c.* 460, Lupicinus in 490.

his Italian predecessors). Yet Romanus was fully aware of the rich tradition within which he had begun to work. Although there is little sign that he wrote or had access to a rule,[72] details of organization familiar in the east were taken for granted: individual cells, a place of prayer, a hostel for visitors; attention to fasting and watching; a distinction between the regular prayer and reading of the solitary and the manual labour of the coenobite; but, under Romanus, a combination of the two.[73] He, like Cassian, was chary of subservience to clerics, and was anxious to adapt the practices of the east to the needs and abilities of his associates.[74] There are hints that his regime was deliberately more lenient than that of Lupicinus, who had already begun to make an independent mark in a satellite community.[75]

With Lupicinus, we enter a more ordered world. There is specific reference to a monastic liturgy – the *vespertina synaxis* of the east. The monastery possessed an *œconomus*: its relations with visitors and dependants were becoming more controlled. Lupicinus enjoyed a growing reputation among secular associates, and could be seen as a threatening critic of civil authority, undermined as it was by sin. Most important, growing attention was paid to the place of obedience in the community. Custom, the example of others, and the advice of the abbot were combined to call into question personal judgement, even when it aimed at more rigorous observance. The governing principles, however, were the need for balance and the schooling of inner motive, not the regimentation of behaviour.[76]

Eugendus, finally, offered a contrast, not only in his more detailed government but also in his settled life: he exemplified a *stabilitas loci* absent in the careers of his predecessors – the assumption (reinforced by Chalcedon) that ascetics would remain in one institution for the whole of their lives. That sprang in his case, perhaps, from a personal inclination to study; and, in spite of his reputation as a legislator, Eugendus displayed other signs of eccentricity. After fire had destroyed the old buildings at Condat, dating back perhaps even to Romanus' day, he set the monastery on a new path, insisting on a single dormitory for all ('setting aside the custom of eastern archimandrites'), and on rigorous adherence to a common life. The author comments on his attachment to Cassian, in preference to Basil, Pachomius and even Lérins itself, because of that master's ability to adapt his recommendations to the conditions of the west. The actual 'rule' of Eugendus is not described: reference is made instead to

[72] Note the vagueness of *V. Rom.* 4, 11, 36; see Martine (1968). Precision was to come with Eugendus, 59; and Romanus was chary of setting too precise a standard, 32f. But custom was distinct from the authority of the master himself. 36. [73] *V. Rom.* 28, 15 and 10 respectively.

[74] *V. Rom.* 18f., 28, 33. Hilary of Arles is specifically criticized. [75] *V. Rom.* 17, 24.

[76] Eastern observances: *V. Lup.* 64f. Organization: 68. External relations: 92f. (Compare the judicial influence of the Gallic recluse Eparchius: Greg. Tur. *Hist.* VI.8.) Obedience: 75f. Gregory's rather different account of Lupicinus and Romanus, *V. pat* 1, reveals not only his different interests but the shifting values of monastic Gaul in the sixth century.

customs enforced elsewhere.[77] Certainly, there are accounts of an ordered liturgy, common and regular meals (for some monks at least, two a day), and abbatial authority. Eugendus tried to control the gifts that the community received and the troubled visitors that flocked to its gates. Yet his dying requests referred in only a general way to the 'institutes of the fathers'. He prayed alone in the cemetery or under a favourite tree. His monks travelled, even to Rome, in search of relics. He allotted tasks in the community according to the talents of individual monks, exercising that insight into the character of each subject that was typical of the old charismatic masters of the Egyptian desert. In some ways, therefore, this coenobitic hero was not so very different from Leunianus of Vienne, living in the solitude of a cell, yet 'ruling monks' and supervising a nearby convent.[78]

The prestige of Lérins and its satellites reached a peak in the career and writings of Caesarius of Arles (died 543). His monastic formation included a period at Lérins; and, after becoming bishop in A.D. 503, he wrote a *Regula monachorum* and longer and more informative *Statuta sanctarum virginum*.[79] One has to be cautious about the meaning he attached to *regula*. Its constant conjunction with other words – *institutio regulæ, discretio et regula* – reminds us that the *regula* itself was still regarded as part of a wider tradition – 'canonical scripture and the books of the ancient fathers'.[80] His written prescriptions are larded like sermons with exhortations to virtue, and reflect upon attitude as much as behaviour.[81] The authority of the abbot or abbess was by now well-established, but balanced by the delegated duties of a *præpositus* and subject to the influence of *seniores*. Caesarius envisaged a fully coenobitic regime, with none of the privacy associated with the cells of the *laura*; and again there is an emphasis on *stabilitas loci*. Women are specifically catered for. Extra care is taken to protect their seclusion. In contrast to their male counterparts, they will pray more than they work (although they also copied books). The bulk of Caesarius' *Rules* is devoted to fasting and liturgy. The latter, by his day, had reached a high degree of detailed sophistication, with variations from season to season and a complex succession of antiphonal and unison psalmody, interspersed with readings. Overshadowing this regime was the bishop himself (a significant resolution of debates in the previous century); but his authority

[77] De Vogüé (1982) II.452 discusses possible connections between the so-called *Regula orientalis* and Condat under Lupicinus and Eugendus.

[78] Stability: *V. Eug.* 126. Rebuilding and its results: 162, 170 (*refutato archmandritarum orientalium instari*, ed. Martine (1968), 422), 173. Monastic regime: 129f., 131, 151, 171. External relations: 147, 172. Death: 177. His prayer: 129, 153f. Travelling monks: 153f. Charismatic insight: 149. Leunianus: 128.

[79] Note that the numeration and nomenclature of *PL* LXVII.1099–104, 1107–20 are not always used by more recent and more reliable editors.

[80] *Statuta* 26 (*Et quamvis*), 30 (*Ad cellarium*), 35 (at *Matri quæ*), 47 (*Te vero*); *Recapitulatio*, 62 (*Et licet*), 72 (*Vos tamen, PL tandem*). Compare *regulari sceptro* in Greg. Tur. *V. pat.* XVI.1, ed. 275.

[81] *Reg. mon.* ed. G. Morin (Maredsous 1942) 151:8f.; 152:8f. (*PL* 13, 19). See especially *Sermons* 233–6.

was carefully defined, and the domestic liberty of the nuns was fully respected.[82] Caesarius also made detailed provision for the endowment of his communities: the preservation of his will allows us a rare glimpse into such arrangements, as it carefully identifies the blocks of land upon which future prosperity would depend.[83]

In spite of selection, the main development is clear. The east provided the first models, and preserved the reputation of the ascetic master and of the *laura* system. Custom and anecdote provided the authority for order, and a move away from that tradition was slow and never total.[84] Yet the common dormitory, the common refectory, the importance of shared labour and the prominence of the abbot became increasingly the norm. The bishop and the secular patron retained some ultimate influence, not least because both shared in the ambition and privilege of the aristocratic élite.

About the following century in Gaul, we gain most from a reading of Gregory of Tours (died 594). His *Histories* are less useful than his more deliberately religious works – the *Liber vitæ patrum* and the *De gloria confessorum* – which have the added advantage of placing clearly coenobitic enterprises in a rich context of eccentric variety; but there is one interesting oddity in his more secular record – Radegund. Royal status made her circumstance exceptional; but the fortunes of her community show the pressures that could be brought to bear upon Caesarius' legacy.[85] In the hagiographical works, however, predictable patterns emerge. Travellers from the east continued to reinforce Palestinian and Syrian customs.[86] Men solitary in spirit and practice lived within communities or in close dependence upon them. They might even be their founders.[87] Such communities

[82] Superiors: *Reg. mon.* ed. Morin, 151:3f. (*PL* 11); see also 152:1f. (*PL* 16), and *Statuta* 35 (at *Matri quæ*). Common life: *Reg. mon.* ed. Morin, 150:13 (*PL* 3); *Statuta* 9 (*Nulli liceat*). Stability: *Statuta* 2 (at *Si qua*). Women: *Statuta* 39 (*Convivium*), 42f. (from *Illud ante*). Bishops: *Statuta* 36 (*Ante omnia propter*), 43 (*Ante omnia observandum*); *Recapitulatio* 64 (*Illud etiam*), 72 (*Vos tamen*, *PL tandem*); and compare Greg. Tur. *Gloria* 79. Books: *Vita sancti Caesarii* 1.58.

[83] Ed. Morin, 283–9. See also *Vita* II.8f., 47.

[84] Witness the splendid portrait in Greg. Tur. *Hist.* VI.6 – an eastern ascetic in Gaul who even imported his own food! One may note how the *Apophthegmata*, when translated into Latin, were rearranged according to theme – though still in no way constituting a rule.

[85] For other instances of royal involvement, see Greg. Tur. *V. pat.* VI and XII; and compare I.5 with *V. Lup.* 92–5. Gregory's personal interest in the famous 'rebellion' that occurred after Radegund's death prompts him to describe the practices of the convent and its endowment with land, which led to the development of widespread estates with officials and tied labourers, supporting an army of domestic servants responsible for the upkeep of urban buildings: *Hist.* VI.29, IX.39f., X.15f. For a brief but authoritative account, see Wood, *Merovingian Kingdoms* 136–9.

[86] Greg. Tur. *V. pat.* III (urban and generous), XIII and XV (characteristically penitential). See also *Hist.* IV.32 (an ascetic who 'stands' – very Syrian), VI.6 (a hermit's imported herbs, and much else), VII.31 (a merchant with St Sergius' finger), X.26 (a Syrian bishop), and X.31 with II.39 (a travelled abbot).

[87] *V. pat.* IV.3, IX; *Gloria* 37 (*iuxta regulas monasteriorum . . . secretius tamen atque peculiarius*, ed. Krusch, 321), 85. Having accustomed ourselves to the often extensive communities of the east, it is worth attending to hints at scale: three monks, for example, in *V. pat.* XV; *collectis secum paucis monachis* in *Gloria* 79, ed. Krusch, 347. Yet Gregory the Great would attribute Rome's safety from the Lombards to the prayers of 3,000 nuns within its walls, *Ep.* 7.23. A founder: *V. pat.* IX.

were soon endowed with fields and woodland, came under the influence of royal patronage, and spawned their own dependent foundations.[88] Cassian and Martin are mentioned still.[89] In Gregory's anecdotes we see at one and the same time the development of a rich monastic culture along the reaches of the Loire and the lasting influence of the Rhône communities, reaching into areas further north. Economic conditions are faithfully recorded. Gardens provided for immediate needs; but cereal crops were also grown, and ascetics worked on the land of others.[90] In a couple of instances, a more rural monastery and the nearby village appear to have been almost intertwined, both in close association with the local church.[91] Such vignettes provide us with a more secure image of varied monastic practice in the sixth-century west (for we shall discover parallels in Benedict's Italy), and modify the rigid impression we might gain from the hopeful prescriptions of church councils (presided over, of course, by bishops eager to maintain a disciplined conformity and to assert their pastoral rights).[92]

Both the tone and the motive of those conciliar decrees remind us that the Gallic church in the sixth century, in ascetic matters as in others, was in need of reform. A weary sense of decline, characteristic of the period generally in both east and west, is evident in many of the specifically ascetic sources we have examined; and we need not attribute it always to outraged conservatism or tremulous eschatology. Gregory himself, albeit a bishop with little experience of monasticism in his own life, and not unsusceptible to the advantages of local eminence or royal patronage, had an honest enough sense of the room for improvement. Yet the crucial pressure, in the case of specifically monastic reform, came from outside the Frankish kingdoms, and is exemplified most obviously in the career of the Irishman Columbanus. Born in the 540s, he arrived in Gaul just as Gregory was completing his *Histories*. After travelling in the Loire region (providing further

[88] *V. pat.* XII. See also the account of Martius, XIV, with subordinate *præpositus*.

[89] *V. pat.* XX.3, following the suggestion of James (1985) 157. Compare possible dependence on Martin – *post magistri dogmata*, ed. B. Krusch; 330 – *Gloria* 56.

[90] *V. pat.* X.1 (garden and hired labour), XVIII.2 (corn and a mill); *Gloria* 23 (where the attractiveness of the garden is also stressed), 81 (bees), 96.

[91] *Gloria* 22f., 56.

[92] The council of Orleans (A.D. 511) set the tone for the coming century: 'Abbots should think of themselves, in the interests of religious humility, as subject to the authority of bishops; and, if in any matter they act in breach of the rule, the bishops should correct them' (canon 19, ed. C. de Clerq *Concilia Galliae, A.511–A. 695* (*CCSL* 148A) 1963, 10). See also Épaone (A.D. 517), canon 19 (episcopal control over succession); Orleans (A.D. 533), canon 21 (vague subjection to episcopal *præcepta*); Arles (A.D. 554), canons 2 and 3 (fairly broad); Tours (A.D. 567), canon 17 (excommunication; but note that canon 7 required the bishop to act in co-operation with other abbots); Narbonne (A.D. 589), canon 6 (against harbouring criminals); and Auxerre (late sixth century), canons 23–6 (various specific controls). Few councils in sixth-century Gaul concerned themselves with the internal discipline of monastic communities. The council of Tours (A.D. 567) was unusual in insisting on a common dormitory (rather than individual or shared cells), and drew up rules for fasting (canons 15 and 18). If, on the other hand, a monk withdrew from a community – 'to build himself a cell', for example: a practice viewed with caution, but allowed for – then he exposed himself to direct episcopal control: Orleans (A.D. 511), canon 22.

evidence of its contacts across the Channel), he established a monastery at Luxeuil in Burgundy, some 150 km north of Condat. It developed eventually into an important centre of medieval monasticism, together with Bobbio, which Columbanus founded later in northern Italy. He died in A.D. 615.

There is a certain irony in this startling and far from welcome intrusion. Fifth-century monks had made a contribution to developments in Ireland, often via Britain and its more immediate Celtic neighbours: not only Patrick, but also shadowy figures like Riochatus (a friend of Faustus of Riez),[93] the disciples and successors of Ninian at Whithorn (the famous *Candida Casa*, dedicated to Martin of Tours),[94] and of Illtud and David in Wales.[95] Now the influence began to flow strongly in the other direction. Columbanus' original rules – the *Regula monachorum* and the *Regula cœnobialis* – were written during his earliest years in south-eastern Gaul, before A.D. 610. They owed something to Benedict (proving his growing influence) but more to the older traditions of Basil and Cassian. Like Cassian, Columbanus issued more theoretical advice than positive prescriptions. The harsh and repetitive punishments of the *Regula cœnobialis* – five blows for this offence, fifteen for that – are disappointing in their allusions, betraying only in the baldest terms the silence, order and deference expected of each monk.[96] But more than a century of Irish independence had carried the monastic society of the island away from the stifling control of the secular nobility, harnessed it to a more pastoral concern for rural converts, and charged it with a Celtic vigour and that righteous attachment to high standards in dedication and observance so obvious in the writings of the Welshman Gildas (died *c.* 570).[97] Not surprisingly, the emphasis estranged Columbanus from royalty in Gaul, especially Theuderic II of Burgundy and his notorious grandmother Brunhild. Thanks to his admiration for Gregory the Great and his loyalty to Roman authority generally, he acquired an increasingly detailed knowledge of Benedict's achievements in Italy, continued to introduce his principles into his own regime, and eventually crossed the Alps in search of more sympathetic surroundings.

Two issues have, for more than a generation, dominated the study of Benedict: the relationship between his own *Rule* and the *Regula magistri*, and

[93] Sid. Ap. *Ep.* 9.9. [94] Bede, *HE* III.4.

[95] Illtud may have come from northern Gaul. Much of our information comes from later hagiography, which is unreliable; but dedications and archaeology provide useful hints. Ireland is well placed in the wider European context by Mayr-Harting (1991) esp. (for our purposes) 33–9, 78–85.

[96] Columbanus' works are edited by G. S. M. Walker (Dublin 1957). Wood, *Merovingian Kingdoms*, provides extensive, documented, convenient reference. See also Clarke and Brennan (1981) and the commentaries provided by Adalbert de Vogüé (1989) in collaboration with Pierre Sangiani and Sister Jean-Baptiste Juglar.

[97] His preoccupations were not predominantly monastic; but he may have been a pupil of Illtud, and he travelled abroad as far as Rome in the Ostrogothic period. For some background, see Higham (1994).

the role of Gregory the Great in making Benedict more widely known, especially in the second book of his *Dialogues*. Both investigations have questioned, in a sense, the originality of Benedict; but the answers given have shown at once the traditional nature of his contribution and the particular qualities that mark his genius and lasting significance.

There is now widespread agreement that Benedict drew heavily upon the *Regula magistri*, which was probably written in the vicinity of Rome during the first quarter of the sixth century. By that time, ascetic developments in southern Gaul were well-known in Italy, and political and ecclesiastical events – the Ostrogothic settlement and the attempts to solve the Acacian schism – were encouraging new relationships between the eastern and western sectors of the empire, represented at the ascetic level, for example, by the Latin *Life* of Pachomius written by Dionysius Exiguus, himself an easterner. So, when Sigismund of Burgundy presided over the foundation of the monastery of St Maurice at Agaune in 515, eastern relics were installed and elements adopted from the liturgical practice of the *Acœmitæ* in Constantinople, while prescriptions were borrowed from the heirs of the Lérins tradition. The monastery was destined to exert considerable influence during the century and more to follow.[98]

The unknown 'Master' of the *Regula magistri* was intent upon preserving a detailed system, thoroughly protected against the world around it, in which the common dormitory, refectory and oratory, together with a garden and outhouses, were surrounded by a wall. Other types of ascetic community, more open, more loosely structured and more mobile (and presumably still common), were severely criticized.[99] An abbot, two subordinate and equal superiors, a cellarer, a porter and weekly teams with domestic duties were described in terms not unlike those of Pachomius; but hierarchy was valued for its own sake, based on secular models.[100] An immensely detailed liturgy departed quite significantly from the customs of Lérins, with great stress on reading and *meditatio* – ancient qualities reflected also in the single daily meal. The 'Master' appeared to accept clear divisions in the community, based on literary and technical skill, although he seems to have been aware that the monastery might thereby encourage within its own walls the social divisions of the secular world.[101] The features that distinguish this rule most famously are its careful submission to the authority of the bishop,[102] and its emphasis within the monastery on the submission of pupil to teacher. The very title of 'master' displays that preference. The

[98] The *Acœmitæ* had long had a reputation for attachment to western views of orthodoxy. Among other later impressions, see Greg. Tur. *Hist.* III.5f. For links with Lérins and the Jura, see De Vogüé (1982) 439f., 447; Theurillat (1954) and Masai (1971).

[99] *Regula magistri* (ed. A. de Vogüé, 3 vols.) (*SChrét.*) 105–7)) I.13, LXI and LXXVIII express typical and detailed caution. [100] See, for example, *Regula magistri* XI.5f. [101] *Regula magistri* L.72, 76f.

[102] Most clearly formulated in relation to the abbot, *Regula magistri* XCIII.

rule is preoccupied with vertical communication between superior and subject rather than with relationships among the subjects themselves. The document is presented as a series of questions and answers, the disciple seeking guidance, evoking the style of Cassian or Basil, but to different effect.

Here, then, was one of Benedict's sources; but one only. He was in many ways a syncretist, working in a world where Caesarius and his associates could influence developments in Ravenna as easily as in Poitiers.[103] For some considerable time, his own *Rule* was to be popularized most effectively in conjunction with Caesarius and with the later Columbanus. Even more important, his use of the *Regula magistri* was tempered in a fundamental way by his dependence on the more social emphases of Augustine. Reading his *Rule*, one is reminded constantly of the 'Master', and yet astonished no less frequently by the skilfully interwoven attention to community life. In the combination that did most to characterize his achievement, the community now balanced, within a trinity of influences, the impact of both the abbot and the rule. Obviously by the time his own *Rule* had developed, circumstances in Italy had changed once again, with the Gothic kingdom in disarray, the armies and administrators of Justinian increasingly in command, and the loyalties of Italians at once weakened and divided. It was a world in which the very definition of community was open to reassessment, and where the ability to maintain an effective economy was subject not only to the stress of war but also to the loss of political focus and identity. No wonder Benedict was more hesitant than his most famous Italian model, offering in his own *Rule* no more than 'the rudiments of monastic observance', a 'little rule for beginners'. Cassian, the *Vitæ patrum* and the rules of Basil were deemed more exhaustive guides.[104]

We owe our biographical knowledge of Benedict to Gregory the Great. The critical problem is whether the portrait provided in the latter's *Dialogues* (completed in A.D. 594) has accurately recorded the milieu of the *Regula magistri* and of Benedict's own *Rule*. Did Gregory, one might almost say, invent the Benedict who has become so familiar to history? In fact, the correspondences are numerous and convincing. As Gregory wrote himself, 'his life could not have differed from his teaching'.[105] In so far as doubts remain, we have no reason to expect that a biographical account, with its attention to change and incident, should reproduce exactly the impressions we may gain from a series of static prescriptions. Rules are not biographies

[103] See Gregory the Great, *Ep.* 12.6; Venantius Fortunatus, *Carm.* VIII.1, and Greg. Tur. *Hist.* III.7, VI.29f.

[104] *Regula Benedicti* (ed. A. de Vogüé, 6 vols. (*SChrét.* 181–6)) LXXIII: *initium conversationis . . . hanc minimam inchoationis regulam*, ed. McCann, 160/162.

[105] Gregory the Great, *Dialogues* (ed. A. de Vogüé, 3 vols. (*SChrét.* 257, 260, 265)) II.36: *nullo modo potuit aliter docere quam vixit*, ed. De Vogüé, 2.242. Gregory's own point was that the *Rule* itself was almost a biography, a portrait of the man.

– a point to bear in mind when we consider the Pachomian corpus or the *vitae* of Gallic wonder-workers.

Nevertheless, Gregory did have points to make that were peculiar to himself. One should not underestimate the complexity of his motives. Like his *Pastoral Care*, the *Dialogues* bear the stamp of the former prefect; of a man used to the exercise of authority and skilful in political as well as moral rhetoric. The audience of the work was not merely ascetic, or even clerical: Gregory wished to present images of practical sanctity to Lombards as well as Romans, to the powerful of the visible world, with whom he felt he had now to collaborate. So his portrait of Benedict is somewhat marked by that context. The irony was that, whether in religious or political terms, neither Benedict nor Gregory could foresee with accuracy, let alone control, the Lombard future.

Central to the *Dialogues*, nevertheless, as to much else from Gregory's pen, was a more intimate concern for the relation between contemplation and action. That could be taken partly, although only partly, as a distinction between monastery and world. He wrestled with the problem of how one might make spiritual insight available to a busier society, without losing the tranquillity and perception of the contemplative state. (As for Benedict – by no means averse, as we shall see, to concern for the outside world – he believed that sustained attention to the realm of the spirit would automatically school a monk to usefulness in the service of others.)

The bishop of Rome was also preoccupied with the issue of authority and leadership. Who was fit to take the helm in yet another set of circumstances? – for the Lombards, occupying the vacuum left by Gothic collapse, had done so amidst widespread destruction, which heralded, in Gregory's view, the imminent end of the world.[106] Perhaps it was that sense of urgency that explained his determination to extend the boundaries of Christendom as far as he could, encouraging at least the beginnings of a missionary fervour among western churchmen. Monks had been no more enthusiastic for such an enterprise previously than any other leaders in the church. Their pastoral endeavours among desert tribesmen or mountain villagers had represented only tiny movements on the Mediterranean map. In the seventh century, by contrast, Columbanus and other exiles – *peregrini pro Christo* – were to develop a quite new enthusiasm for distant travel, even beyond the current boundaries of the empire, dragging disciples of Benedict and other pioneers in their wake. To that extent, at least, they provided circumstances in which a more deliberately pastoral policy, such as that of Gregory himself, could find support and promise growth.[107]

Finally, we would not expect a pope to be indifferent to the economic fortunes of the west, who administered estates under his own jurisdiction

[106] *Dial.* III.38.3 especially; see also III.37.21; IV.43.2. That sense of doom is widespread in Gregory's writings, especially in the *Moralia* and his commentary on *Kings*.

[107] Note the judicious caution of Wood, *Merovingian Kingdoms* 311–15.

with laborious scruple, and congratulated in his *Dialogues* a miraculous power among holy men that habitually averted flood and disease, enhanced fertility, and provided abundance in time of famine.

So the *Dialogues* placed Benedict in a broad ascetic context, much of it now familiar.[108] Alongside the many monasteries, described in the first book most of all, Gregory mentioned hermits and near-hermits,[109] and even ascetics who had come from the east, bringing with them customs that would not have seemed out of place in the writings of John of Ephesus or Cyril of Scythopolis.[110] Benedict's contemporaries and immediate disciples would have jostled with such assorted company. Among them we may even include the erudite Cassiodorus (about whom Gregory was silent), an exile in the east after his distinguished but finally embittered career in Ostrogothic government, and now returned to found something approaching a monastery at Vivarium.[111] In the matter of authority, bishops had some pre-eminence, as envisaged by Justinian's Pragmatic Sanction of A.D. 554; but Gregory could be surprisingly cautious about the extent of their control in monastic matters, and recommended in practise a very literal adherence to the precedents established at Chalcedon, keeping bishops well away from the internal affairs of communities, in Gaul as well as Italy. While the third book of the *Dialogues* was devoted to the thesis that bishops could be (or should be) as holy as anyone, and showed them at work among monks, Gregory did not disguise the fact that they could often be at odds with superiors, in spite of being sometimes monks themselves or presiding over ascetic households.[112] Holy men took their own initiatives, founding communities;[113] and, like the clergy, they claimed a right to judge and advise.[114] Not least because of that association, they were portrayed as natural evangelists, as well as supporters of the poor.[115] Laymen exercised a further patronage meanwhile, setting up buildings and even appointing superiors, although their generosity was occasionally rejected.[116]

Within that framework of establishment, control and social concern, ascetics of all types worked the land, miraculously and otherwise. While

[108] Gregory included his own monastic experience, which may well have become disillusioned, wedged as it was between the careers of a prefect and a pope. His famous letter to Leander, *Ep.* 5.53[a], admitted, in relation to the *quies monasterii, quia habendo non fortiter tenui, quam stricte tenenda fuerit, perdendo cognovi*. See also *Dial.* I, preface.

[109] *Dial.* III.14.2f., 16.1f., 17.1f., 18.1f.; IV.31.2f.

[110] Certainly Isaac the Syrian, living in a church and gathering disciples around himself, *Dial.* III.14.2–5. Possibly the cave-dwelling Martin criticized by Benedict for wearing chains, III.16.9. Probably the Menas of III.26.1f. See also IV.37.3f., 40.1of.

[111] Whatever justice allows us to think of him as a 'monk' has to be based on a reading of his *Institutions* (ed. Mynors (1937)), hardly the work of one *scienter nescius*!

[112] For examples of close bonds between ascetic and clerical careers, see *Dial.* I.4.3f., 9 *passim*; III.13.1, 22.1, 36.1; IV.33 *passim*. Much is implied less directly elsewhere. Gregory's caution was expressed mostly in his letters: see *Ep.* 3.58, 7.12, 13.12.

[113] *Dial.* I.1.3, IV.11.1f.

[114] *Dial.* II.23 and 25 make the connection with Benedict, basing authority on experience and insight.

[115] *Dial.* I.1.5f., 4.8; III.15.2, 34.2f.

[116] *Dial.* II.35.1 provides a detailed instance. See also II.22.1, III.15.2. Contrasting caution is betrayed in III.14.4f., IV.9.1. A peasant surrendered his goods to Benedict for safe keeping, II.31.1f.

some groups were reluctant to accept outside employment (Benedict could be particularly strict in that regard),[117] others hired themselves to neighbouring farmers in a fashion long traditional in the east.[118] 'I can lay claim to no particular profession', said one, 'but I do know how to keep a good garden.'[119] Gardens figure frequently in Gregory's account, hinting perhaps at the commonest form of material support for ascetics, the small-scale cultivation of vegetables.[120] Reference to endowment, therefore, need not suggest large properties;[121] but olives are mentioned, and some ascetics at least had land enough on which to grow grain for their annual needs.[122] Gregory's own correspondence provides useful details of endowments, especially where urban communities depended on revenue from rural properties.[123]

Benedict was presented also as a contemplative, in Gregory's special sense; *scienter nescius et sapienter indoctus*, to use the famous phrase: 'ignorant but informed, untutored but wise'.[124] Hidden in the 'desert' of Subiaco, he attracted disciples, while worrying about the threat to his *contemplatio*; a whole community of ascetics invited him to be their abbot.[125] His eventual influence was the inevitable outcome of his early discipline and understanding. He represented the era (documented no less by Gregory of Tours) when miracles were performed once more by the living and not simply at the tombs of the dead.[126] He founded monasteries of his own in conjunction with lay patrons, exercising that concern for other ascetics that was natural in a monk.[127] Nor did he forget to engage in preaching the Christian faith and alleviating need.[128]

Gregory wished to make one basic point. The *Rule* of Benedict, which he referred to and had undoubtedly consulted, was designed in his eyes to make a particular brand of sanctity available to society as a whole – society being here defined as the Christian church. That sanctity was at once perceptive, powerful and generous, schooled by reflection and service. The discipline of the *Rule* itself conformed entirely to that ideal. When it comes to the order of the monastic day, Cassian, Lérins, Caesarius and the 'Master' will have fortified us against surprises: the variations are in most respects minor and do not touch the essence of the 'Benedictine spirit'. Gregory's occasional references to buildings give solid shape to the way of life

[117] *Dial.* I.7.5, II.12. [118] *Dial.* I.4.12, II.32.1f.

[119] *Dial.* III.1.3: *artem quidem aliquam nescio, sed hortum bene excolere scio*, ed. De Vogüé, 2.260.

[120] *Dial.* I.3.2, 4.7; II.6.1; III.14.6f.; IV.23.1 (produce given to refugees).

[121] *Dial.* I.7.2. Benedict's straitened circumstances in II.21.1f. hint at limited agricultural opportunities. [122] *Dial.* I.7.5; II.33.2; IV.20.2.

[123] *Ep.* 9.137 especially – a Roman example – and see also 2.10, 9.197, 13.12.

[124] *Dial.* II, preface. The paradox is repeated in III.37.20. [125] *Dial.* II.1f.

[126] *Dial.* II.16.1. For the insight of the living preferred to the power of the dead, see IV.9.

[127] *Dial.* II.22 provides a vivid example. For the principle, see IV.11.3.

[128] Preaching, *Dial.* II.8.2, 19.1; generosity, II.28.1, in the context of I.3.4 and IV.23.1f.

demanded in the *Rule* – the oratory for prayers, the refectory for common meals, a kitchen, and a hospice for strangers.[129] More important, however, is Benedict's constant attention to the foundations of community life. The abbot was master, but one above all who cared for the weak and was answerable to authorities beyond himself. He presided over a distinct and protected society, whose members varied in their strengths and abilities, although they were not thereby divided according to secular categories and expectations. This community prayed briefly and intensely, and dedicated itself otherwise to work and to service, remaining open always to requests and visitations. It saw itself as making no more than a start in religious devotion, and acknowledged the rich tradition from which it sprang.[130]

The simplicity and earnestness of the Benedictine *Rule* demands of us, as it demanded of the monk himself, an answer to the question: what was the purpose of those institutional experiments? The hesitancy of Benedict himself, the wealth of Gregory's *Dialogues*, the evident variety of ascetic practice, even at the end of the sixth century, all point to an enduring polarity, a cautious attempt to balance contrasting but compatible ambitions. On the one hand, one sought guidance in the development of insight and self-mastery, and preserved a sense of loyalty to ascetic masters and to fellow devotees. On the other hand, one sympathized with the weak and the needy, gave them what help one could, and worked to give more. Obscured at times by demonic fears and eccentric exaggerations, those motives remain evident in the anecdotal sources that provide so much of our information about the east. An attachment to discipleship, mutual encouragement and service was no less evident in western practice. The proliferation of *regulæ* and the textual problems that beset our understanding of their development, coupled with our knowledge that the *Rule* of Benedict did eventually gain paramount authority over an extensive and highly organized system of communities, can blind us to the similarity of practice and attitude that bound all ascetics together. And that consistency of motive and principle does most to remind us how asceticism was linked with and contributed to wider late Roman debates about authority, education and tradition.

There was, indeed, a theory of the ascetic life, widely known and constantly appealed to. Its embodiment in practical discipline was developed in the writings of Evagrius of Pontus (died 399), but the tradition was rooted in the works of Origen, and was extended in other ways by the contemporaries of Evagrius, Basil of Caesarea and the two Gregorys of

[129] *Dial.* II.22.1; to which add II.8.5, 9 and 10; III.15.2.

[130] Abbot: *Regula Benedicti* III.1f.; XXVII.6; LXIV.3f.; LXV. Seclusion: I and LXI. Categories of person: II.12; but compare XLVIII.23 with *Regula magistri* L, and see *Regula Benedicti* II.18; XXI.4; LIX.3. See Gregory's account in *Dial.* II.20. Prayer: XX.3f. Work: preface, 14, 45. External relations: IV; LIII.16; but LXVI.6f. is more aligned to the *Regula magistri*.

Nazianzus and Nyssa. The names of all those men recur constantly in the ascetic literature of our later period. Cassian was a faithful disciple of Evagrius; Dorotheus of Gaza, at the other end of the empire and period, was steeped in the thought of Origen and the Cappadocians. (The date of Dorotheus' death is unknown. After apprenticeship under the guidance of Barsanuphius and John at Thavath – Hilarion's native village, close to the settlement in exile of Esaias of Scetis – he established a monastery of his own *c.* 540.)

Cassian's writings were charged with an Alexandrian optimism. The ascetic was made in the image of God; and the perfection of that image, the re-establishment of union with the creator, was in some sense a natural expectation, based on the development of innate qualities. The path to fulfilment lay in self-knowledge and self-mastery. Knowledge became accurate and effective when λογισμοί, *cogitationes*, the constant movements of thought and imagination, were identified, ordered and focused in tranquillity. Mastery, a parallel enterprise, consisted in control of πάθοι, *passiones*, the clouded and disturbing movements of the heart. Every external prescription was seen by Cassian as underpinning that interior task.[131] 'Thought' and 'passion' replaced the demon. The corresponding virtues were seen as forming a unity. No success against anger, for example, would weaken the struggle against greed: any step forward would bring its reward in an integrated drama of self-possession. The result, albeit based on vigilance and effort, was a genuine freedom: freedom from fear of one's own inadequacy, of temptation, of judgement; freedom that accepted submission to others, because it guaranteed trust and affection. The gradual achievement of that balance represented in part a movement from πρακτική to θεωρητική, from the 'active' to the 'contemplative' life. It gave asceticism an historical dimension both personal and social. In the latter case, the monk acquired a place in the general unfolding of salvation: the purity of intention that had characterized the early Christians in Jerusalem, compromised with time, was restored within the monasteries, set, therefore, at the heart of the church. (To that extent, Cassian shared the view of Augustine.) In the individual's life, one might pass from coenobitic practice to the more contemplative life of the hermit. In the event, as we know, Cassian catered most for community life; and in the very passages where he creates his more general history, he emphasizes the usefulness of asceticism in the company of others.[132]

Moving at once from Cassian to Dorotheus, from Latin back to Greek and across more than a century, the tenacity of the spiritual tradition is made obvious by the similarity of their approach. Dorotheus' allusions to his Palestinian milieu combine the impression gained from Cyril of

[131] *Inst.* IV.32f. [132] *Con.* XVIII above all; but see also XVI.

Scythopolis with the traditions proper to Esaias and the Egyptian exiles around Gaza. The letters and responses of Barsanuphius continue to reflect the practices of the fifth and early sixth century: the *laura* system of solitaries surrounded by coenobites, served by their close disciples and badgered by the curiosity of laymen and clerics. It seems, however, that against both the rigour and the disorder of that world Dorotheus eventually revolted, feeling obliged to set up a community of his own, for which he wrote the *Διδασκαλίαι Ψυχωφελεῖς*, his *Instructions for the Help of Souls*. There was still plenty of reference to the practicalities of the monastic regime; to hard work and continuous reflection, with a characteristically eastern emphasis on exile, the life of the 'stranger'; and to respect for the traditions of the elders.[133] The more inward attainments, such as that of humility, Dorotheus' favourite virtue, were seen as part of a history of salvation, reversing Adam's pride; and the Evagrian focus on passion and corresponding virtue was faithfully maintained.[134] Dorotheus recommended constant consultation, the disclosure and assessment of *λογισμοί*. The relation of master and disciple was essentially one of trust, which was the only acceptable justification for obedience in the Pachomian tradition.[135] Dorotheus was also attentive, like Cassian and Benedict, to relations within the community: relations at once tactful, instructive and warm.[136] In a sense, he had reversed the direction of ascetic theory in a way that both Cassian and Euthymius had recognized: surrendering a passionate desire for *ἡσυχία*, the silence of the solitary life, in exchange for *νῆψις*, a tranquil self-possession induced in oneself by the company of others, and then offered to others as the best encouragement in a common task.

It is refreshing to find so sober and considerate a view of self-improvement surviving amidst the turmoil and untidiness of eastern ascetic practice. Successfully transplanted to the west in Cassian's works, it had also inspired both Benedict and Gregory the Great. Ascetics could be cruel both to themselves and to others, with little apparent benefit and a considerable degree of injustice. Yet enough of them paid heed to theoretical principle and held fast to the challenge of combining self-mastery and usefulness. The skill lay in pursuing a vision of God that avoided blindness to the needs and aspirations of others. Basil had known as much, and Pachomius. Nearly two centuries later, the *ταπείνωσις*, the humility of Dorotheus was echoed in Benedict's *dominici schola servitii*, the 'school of the Lord's service'.[137]

And for all his concern with theory, for all his emphasis on the inner life, there is enough anecdote in Dorotheus' text and enough humanity in the

[133] *Didasc.* XI provides many details of the regime; for other points, I.11, II.37, VI.69, XIV.153.

[134] *Didasc.* I.7, XII.134.

[135] See *Didasc.* V.61f., and *Ep.* 2. The attitude of VII.85 was essential to the *ἀδιάκριτος ὑπακοή* – so often translated 'blind obedience' – of I.25.

[136] *Didasc.* IV *passim*, VI.77f., and *Ep.* I.180f.

[137] *Didasc.* I.7; *Regula Benedicti* preface, 45.

man himself to make his work a fitting conclusion to our whole investigation. For the chief impression given by ascetics in that age is of vigorous independence. In the end, it is not the eccentricities of the hermit or the discipline of the coenobite that captures chief attention. In particular, the history of asceticism in the fifth and sixth century does not revolve around the relative merits and victories of the eremitic and the coenobitic life. True, much of ascetic literature adopts a position on one side or the other in that debate; but that may have been a feature more of texts and their authors than of less self-conscious devotees. Deeper than those social configurations, there lay a firm belief in discipleship.

The practical implications of such belief were varied. Most obviously, imitation and respect, perhaps even obedience, and certainly trust were central to a disciple's life. The ascetic was also, along with the master, heir to a tradition, partly oral, partly written, perceived in either case as orthodox, guaranteed to reflect and fulfil the will of God, encouraging 'a virtue and morality that was worthy of the faith'.[138] Discipleship involved also continuous application, a life of concentrated labour. Regardless of social complexities, that labour was universally perceived as a mixture of prayer, fasting and manual work. The quality above all that set that heritage in motion was authority: an authority recognized in the master, and acquired in turn by the disciple.

All else we have observed remained subordinate to those concerns. Even in the most ordered and crowded community, the individual ascetic had models to admire and personal goals to achieve; and both admiration and achievement were often dependent on quite intimate relations. There was, in the end, a hidden stillness to asceticism that community life, paradoxically, could only make more intense. Any doubts we may retain about the reasonableness or honesty of late Roman asceticism rests precisely on the ultimate inaccessibility of the individual spirit.

What we can discern, however, is the immense variety of behaviour that resulted. Wherever we capture a close picture of the formed ascetic in action, we observe an individual, a man or woman recognizably inspired by widely accepted practices, but bringing to the tasks of self-improvement an attitude and a taste entirely their own. 'Holiness', as understood at the time, was not a matter of conformity to anything so transient as a regular regime, but was based on the closest possible engagement with the invisible God. Among those who might claim to have come nearest success, that inner victory displayed itself upon the surface of each one's personality in ways that no one else could lay claim to. If there was anything, nevertheless, that they truly shared, it sprang only, in their eyes, from their being disciples of a common Lord.

[138] Zach. *HE* II.5.

CHAPTER 26

HOLY MEN

PETER BROWN

Some time in the 520s, the Great Old Man Barsanuphius, an Egyptian recluse, wrote from his cell in the vicinity of Gaza, in order to comfort a sick and dispirited monk:

> I speak in the presence of Christ, and I do not lie, that I know a servant of God, in our generation, in the present time and in this blessed place, who can also raise the dead in the name of Jesus our Lord, who can drive out demons, cure the incurable sick, and perform other miracles no less than did the apostles . . . for the Lord has in all places his true servants, whom he calls no more *slaves* but *sons* (Galatians 4.7) . . . If someone wishes to say that I am talking nonsense, as I said, let him say so. But if someone should wish to strive to arrive at that high state, let him not hesitate.
>
> (Barsanuphius, *Correspondance* 91, trans. Regnault (1971) 84)

Throughout the Christian world of the fifth and sixth century, the average Christian believer (like the sick monk, Andrew) was encouraged to draw comfort from the expectation that, somewhere, in his own times, even, maybe, in his own region, and so directly accessible to his own distress, a chosen few of his fellows had achieved, usually through prolonged ascetic labour, an exceptional degree of closeness to God. God loved them as his favoured children. He would answer their prayers on behalf of the majority of believers, whose own sins kept them at a distance from him. Thus, when the bubonic plague struck the eastern Mediterranean in 542/3, the Great Old Man wrote at once to reassure his monks on the state of the world:

> There are many who are imploring the mercy of God, and certainly no one is more a lover of mankind than he, but he does not wish to show mercy, for the mass of sins committed in the world stands in his way. There are, however, three men who are perfect before God, who have transcended the measure of human beings and who have received the power to bind and to loose, to remit our faults or to retain them. They *stand upright in the breach* (Psalms 105.23) to ensure that the world is not wiped out at one blow, and, thanks to their prayers, God will chastise with mercy . . . They are John, at Rome, Elias, at Corinth, and another in the province of Jerusalem. And I am confident that they shall obtain that mercy.
>
> (Barsanuphius, *Correspondance* 569, Regnault (1971) 369)

Himself a total recluse, Barsanuphius was unusual in the emphasis that he placed on the power of prayer alone, when offered by such saints. Of the three that he mentioned, one was studiously anonymous, and the other two are not known as 'holy men' from any other sources.

The modern historian of late antiquity, however, tends to approach the issue of sanctity from another direction. He is interested in the well-known phenomenon of the role allotted to living holy persons within the Christian communities, and, more generally, within the religious imagination of the period. What he wishes to find – and finds in impressive abundance – are the writings of those who believed in no uncertain terms that certain figures, 'servants of God', 'friends of God', 'men of God' (persons whom for want of a better term we tend to call 'holy men'), both existed and should be seen to exist. The historian, in fact, concentrates on sources that privilege the fully public deeds of holy men at the expense of the equally intense and effective power of prayer frequently ascribed to more reclusive persons, to holy women quite as much as holy men. This chapter will follow the grain of a modern historiographical interest, in that it isolates for examination one category only of holy persons: it will be about 'holy men', about those 'servants of God', that is, whom contemporaries believed to have been specially chosen by God, in their own time, as in past ages, to show forth the power of his arm, through the *coruscatio*, the forceful lightning-flash, of visible miracles.

Holy men of this kind played a crucial role in the religious imagination of many late antique persons. They made the Christian God present in their own age and locality; and they did so to such an extent that disbelief came to focus less on the existence of the Christian God so much as on his willingness to provide a distant human race – and especially the unkempt inhabitants of a given region – with the crowning mercy of palpable human agents of his will. At the same time as Barsanuphius, near Gaza, was writing his letters, a farmer on the high plateau behind the coastline of Lycia was unimpressed when told by his neighbour of visits to the holy man, Nicholas of Sion:

> What is this 'servant of God'? As the Lord God lives, I would not put my trust in any man on earth. (*Life*, 22, ed. Ševčenko and Ševčenko (1984) 43)

Lapidary though such statements of belief and disbelief might be, their very trenchancy served to veil – from contemporaries quite as much as from modern historians – a whole range of conflicting assumptions that surrounded the figure of the holy man in late antiquity. The very possibility that such persons might exist raised basic questions on the relations between God and human beings that received sharply different answers in different Christian regions.

That sanctity, when achieved, should show itself at all to the world in the form of popular and much sought-after physical 'signs' – such as healing, exorcism, successful intercessory prayer for safety from natural disasters, prophecy, blessing and cursing – was an issue that caused the finest representatives of the selfsame ascetic tradition that produced the overwhelming majority of holy persons to think carefully about what such a gift might mean to those who had received it, and how it should be best deployed. Thus Gregory the Great, in Rome, would 'draw ever new refreshment' from tales told by old men of the deeds of the holy men and women of his native Italy, in his *Dialogues* (Gregory, *Dialogi* I.10.20). Yet, in the same years, he could write to warn the monk Augustine in A.D. 601 of the very real spiritual perils involved in living up to current expectations as a wonder-working missionary among the barbarians of Kent:

> for the weak mind may be raised up by self-esteem, and so the very cause for which it is raised on high, through honour from outsiders, may lead, through vainglory, to an inner fall. (Gregory, *Registrum* XI.36; also in Bede, *HE* I.31)

No agreement was reached on such matters by Christian writers of the period. From the Iona of Columba (who died in the same year, 597, as Augustine reached Kent from Rome) to the Nestorian communities of Mesopotamia, Iran and central Asia (whose representatives reached China in the same generation) an unmistakably late antique Christian language of the holy, that expected 'servants of God' to make themselves known to the world at large by 'signs', was spoken in a number of quite distinctive local dialects. Given this situation, the purpose of this chapter is twofold. First, to use the abundant evidence for attitudes towards the activities of living holy persons in various Christian regions to bring into clearer focus, through significant contrasts, the principal outlines of a human geography of the holy within widely differing Christian communities. The second follows from this: it is to seize the characteristics of the period as a whole, from A.D. 425 to around 630, as one stage among many in the long process of Christianization. For the activities of the Christian holy man provide precious evidence for the slow building up, in different ways and in different regions, of what Norman Baynes once called a 'thought-world',[1] a thought-world that came to form the basis of the religious culture of Byzantium, of the medieval west and of the Christian communities of the middle east.

It is easy to forget how slowly this thought-world took on unambiguously Christian features in the late antique period. Yet part of the fascination of the Christian hagiography of these centuries is that it enables us to glimpse Christianity itself against its wider background. Christianity

[1] Baynes (1960) 24–46.

appears more clearly in such texts than in any others as a relative newcomer, perched against a very ancient spiritual landscape, whose principal contours, in the form of notions of the nature and function of the holy, had existed long before the rise of the Christian church to public favour. Immovably, if indistinctly, visible out of the corner of the eye in even the most unambiguously Christian texts, these permanent features were renamed or subjected to selective inattention through the very act of recording the hagiographic evidence that has come down to us. As a result, the writing of the lives of active Christian saints became, for contemporaries, a way of learning how to view the supernatural world in Christian terms. The very repetitiveness and stereotyped form of the great majority of our hagiographic sources, qualities which prove tiresome to historians who have tended to use such sources as precious evidence for the day-to-day realities of late Roman society, underline their role as part of a far larger process. Piled one on top of the other over the generations, such stories insensibly steered purveyor and audience alike towards particular views of the working of the holy in the world, and tacitly excluded others.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the period should begin with what would soon become 'classic' works of hagiography, designed to capture the dazzling quality of the heroes of a 'second Apostolic age'.[2] Sulpicius Severus' *Life of Martin* (of 396) and the further defence of his hero's reputation in the *Dialogues* (of 404–6), the *Historia Monachorum* and *Ecclesiastical History* of Rufinus (of 402), the *Lausiac History* of Palladius (of 420) and Theodoret of Cyrrhus' *History of the Friends of God* (of 440) have a stark, black-and-white quality about them: we see the late Roman world lit up in great lightning-flashes coming from the direction of the desert. At the end of our period, by contrast, we are dealing with a 'late classical' flowering of a hagiography marked, rather, by a sense of the holy that is as infinitely differentiated as the tints of an autumn landscape. Cyril of Scythopolis, in his lives of the monks of Palestine (of 558),[3] Gregory, bishop of Tours (573–94), in his *History* and *Eight Books of Miracles* (of the early 590s),[4] the Monophysite John of Ephesus' *Lives of the Eastern Saints* (of the late 560s),[5] the *Spiritual Meadow* of the Chalcedonian, John Moschus (of around 614),[6] the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great (of 593–4)[7] and the slightly later *Lives* of Symeon the Holy Fool of Emesa and of John the Almsgiver by Leontius of Neapolis (of 641–2)[8] show us a world where the full range of the holy has come to be caught in a fine web of Christian words. A recent study of the workings of social memory has made plain that stories exist to

[2] Ruggini (1981) and Thélamon (1981). [3] Tr. Price (1991); Flusin (1983).
[4] Esp. *Vita Patrum* tr. James; Van Dam (1988).
[5] Tr. E. W. Brooks, *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, in *PO* XVII–XIX (1923–5); Harvey, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis*. [6] Trans. Wortley (1992). Chadwick (1974). [7] Ed. De Vogüé, *Dialogues*.
[8] Mango (1984a) and Déroche (1995).

provide us with a set of stock explanations which underlie our predisposition to interpret reality in the ways that we do.[9]

In the hagiography of the late sixth century, we are dealing with just this. There is hardly an incident connected with the holy, from Tours to Amida (modern Diyarbekir, eastern Turkey), which is not placed within a narrative framework whose very banality and strong sense of *déjà vu* serves to make it seem utterly matter-of-fact – that this is how the holy works, and in no other way.

It is important to have lingered over the nature of the sources that the historian uses in approaching the holy man. They give the impression that the 'holy man' existed largely in the eye of the believer. This, of course, was not the whole story. Contemporaries believed that sanctity was achieved through ascetic labour, through humility and through the grace of God, according to long traditions of spiritual guidance, of which we have more abundant evidence for this period, the golden age of Christian ascetic wisdom, than that provided by the vivid *Lives* of the saints, which form the basis of modern studies of late antique hagiography. Yet, reassuring – even infectious – though the undemonstrative sanctity of many Christian men and women might be to their fellow believers, contemporaries wanted something more from a holy man. Even though he might be careful always to present himself as no more than one humble 'servant of God' among many, in the quiet manner of a mature monastic tradition, the holy man was frequently approached, in his own lifetime, as

> a brilliant star, spreading its rays . . . an unshakeable column . . . who puts demons to flight, who gives healing to the sick, a father to orphans, a food-supply to the poor, a covering to the homeless . . . a source of repentance to all sinners and a staff to the indigent. (*Life of Theodore of Sykeon* 2, ed. Festugière (1970) 2)

To find anything else was disappointing. A peasant who had walked in to Ancona to visit the holy man Constantius was very surprised to be shown a little man perched half-way up a ladder, busily lighting the lamps of the shrine. He had, of course, expected to find a *grandis homo*, a Big Man (Greg. *Dial.* 1.5.5).

Certainly, the holy man came to be seen as such in retrospect. He was almost invariably presented in this manner by those who had developed a strong interest in his reputation – most often by disciples connected with a monastic establishment that had grown perilously large in the lifetime of the saint, and that faced a recession of gifts and visitors once the glory of his living presence had departed. The Syriac *Panegyric* on Symeon Stylites (396–459) was an oratorical performance, designed for the annual gathering

[9] Fentress and Wickham (1992) 51.

that commemorated the greatest rain miracle of his career. It was a verbal accompaniment to the spectacular new architecture of the pilgrimage shrine set up around the base of what was now an empty column – a shrine complete with baptistery, monastery, guest-hostel and triumphal way leading up from the plain, that had come to weigh heavily on a once open site occupied by the living Symeon on the limestone ridge at Telnesin.[10] Besa's *Life* of Shenoute of Atripe (385–466) was written for a similar occasion – the annual festival of the great abbot, celebrated beneath the lowering walls of the White Monastery.[11] From Iona to Telnesin and upper Egypt, the *Life* of a saint was less a biography than a recital of *virtutes*, of deeds of power. It was narrated in such a way as to keep alive the expectation that such power would remain available to the pious for as long as the respect once shown to its dead wielder continued to be shown by the outside world to the monastery that guarded the holy man's memory.[12]

Apart from the precious letters of Barsanuphius and fragments of sources, such as the *ostraka* of Epiphanius, a late-sixth-century hermit of Thebes, we seldom catch a holy man in action through documents that stem from himself – still less do we hear him talk about himself. As 'servants of God', many holy men simply placed a high value on self-effacement. But there is more to it than that: a public man in an ancient, epic tradition, the holy man as we usually meet him in his *vita*, was condemned, by the writers of hagiography, to 'utter externality'.[13] It is only where we would least expect it, from the Atlantic coast of fifth-century Ireland, that we learn from the *Confessio* of Patricius the Briton (now known to us as St Patrick) of what it was like to respond, as a slave in Mayo, to the call of holiness in its late antique Christian form:

> But after I reached Ireland, well, I pastured the flocks every day and I used to pray many times a day: more and more did my love of God and my fear of Him increase, and my faith grew and my spirit stirred, and as a result I would say up to a hundred prayers in one day, and almost as many at night; I would even stay in the forests and on the mountain and would wake to pray before dawn in all weathers, snow, frost, rain: and I felt no harm and there was no listlessness in me – as I now realise, it was because the Spirit was fervent within me.
>
> (Patricius, *Confessio* 16, trans. A. B. E. Hood, *St Patrick*. London and Chichester (1978) 44)

What matters for our account, however, as it did for many contemporaries, was how a closeness to God, gained preferably in the wild, was seen to act in the settled world. On this subject each late antique writer of hagiography had his own firm notions of what constituted an appropriate narrative

[10] Doran (1992). [11] Besa, *Vita Sinuthii* 1, tr. Bell (1983) 41.
[12] A fact seen most clearly in the reception of late antique hagiography in Ireland: Picard (1982) and Herbert (1988). [13] Bakhtin (1981) 133.

of the emergence and function of a holy person. Let us pass from west to east, looking largely at the hagiography of the late sixth century, in order to establish the distinctive features of what folklorists have called the 'oikotype', the 'home type', the 'locally standardized species' of accounts that both justified and delimited the activities of holy persons in differing Christian environments.[14]

The hagiography of Gaul – not only the works of Gregory of Tours but also earlier sources such as the *Lives of the Fathers of the Jura*[15] – suggest a reticence in the face of living holy men which is, at first sight, surprising in a world that consciously looked back to the classic study of a holy man in action, written by an exact contemporary – the *Life of Martin* by Sulpicius Severus. But it is easy to forget that, with Sulpicius, the memory of Martin lingered for more than a generation as the special preserve of a profoundly alienated segment of the Christian aristocracy of Gaul.[16] Martin's miracles were presented by Sulpicius himself as the desperate last gestures of a prophet in a darkening world. They were performed, in part, to counter the appeal of Antichrist, who, so Martin informed his disciples, had been born in the east and was already a boy of eight (Sulp. Sev. *Dial.* II.14).

A mood of ambivalence about the claims of living holy persons settled heavily on the Christianity of Gaul. It went back to the *cause célèbre* of Priscillian, who had, after all, been known to have prayed successfully for rain, and yet had ended his life executed as a common sorcerer.[17] The uncertain light of the imagined approach of Antichrist heightened the need for caution. All too many wonder-working 'prophets' came to enjoy a Christ-like veneration in Gaul and Spain in the course of the fifth and sixth century. They turned out to be 'pseudo-prophets', troubling heralds of Antichrist's presence in the world (Sulp. Sev., *V. Mart.* 24; Greg. Tur. *Hist.* X.25). In the panic that accompanied the Hunnish invasion of 451, St Genovefa narrowly escaped being stoned by the citizens of Paris as one such 'pseudo-prophet' (*V. Genovefae* 12, ed. Krusch, *MGH*, *Script. rer. Mer.* 3 (1896) 219).

At the same time, devout aristocrats who admired those monks who followed in the footsteps of Martin, such as were the late-fifth-century hermits of the Jura, tended to keep memories of the holy 'in the family', as it were, through intense but inward-looking networks of spiritual friendship. The senatorial lady Syagria, for instance, kept the letters of St Eugendus locked away in a cupboard 'to kiss *in lieu* of the right hand of the blessed man', biting on them with her teeth in urgent search for healing (*V. Eugendi*, *V. Patr. Jur.* III.12, ed. Martine (1968) 145–6).

One suspects that in Gaul exacting social codes of diffidence among pious aristocrats – oligarchic codes, partly moulded by envy and by a dislike

[14] Fentress and Wickham (1992) 74. [15] Ed. Martine (1968). [16] Stancliffe (1983) 265–312.
[17] Chadwick (1976).

of *parvenus* of any kind, spiritual or social – combined with a sincere monastic fear of vainglory. *Elatio* might ensue from any display of miraculous powers, thereby turning the quiet 'temple of the heart' into a 'place of merchandise'. Self-interested drives might creep into the heart of a monk, once he had the reputation of a wonder-worker to maintain in the face of a notoriously exacting audience of clients (*V. Lupicini*, *V. Patr. Jur.* II.15, 114). Only when dead and in the peace of God's paradise could those dramatic manifestations of spiritual power and effective patronage, that had been latent in the soul of the living holy man, blaze forth for the good of all, because freed by death from the all-too-human stain of vanity (*V. Lupicini*, *V. Patr. Jur.* II.16, 117).

When, in the 580s, Gregory of Tours began to look back to find memories of the holy men of his region, his failure to record more than a few such persons reflected a complicated situation. On the one hand, as a Gallo-Roman bishop, he had a strong interest in asserting the pre-eminent importance of the shrine of his own city, that of St Martin of Tours. But, loyal though he was to the cults of his adopted city and of his family, Gregory had no insuperable aversion to other forms of Christian sanctity. Local memory may have let him down. Though holy men and women had doubtless played decisive roles, in their own lifetime, in extending the reach of Christianity far beyond the cities into the countryside of Gaul, Spain and the Rhine estuary,[18] they did not attract memories that were as enduring as those associated, in Gregory's mind and, one suspects, in the circles within which he moved, with the urban tombs of the few great, long-dead bishops. It was around these tombs that the faithful tended to swarm, 'like happy bees around their hive', leaving on them a patina of expectations of posthumous acts of power, as they begged the custodian priest for

> pieces of wax . . . a little dust . . . a few threads of the tomb-covering, all carrying off for some specific purpose the same grace of health.
>
> (Greg. Tur. *Vita Patrum* VIII.6)

One need only compare the *Lives of the Fathers* of Gregory of Tours with the *Life of Euthymius* of Cyril of Scythopolis, written in 556, to realize the extent of the lacuna brought about by the absence, in Gaul, of enduring 'fixatives' for the memory of holy living persons. In the monastic communities of the Judaean desert, memory itself could stand still for over a century. The miracles that Cyril witnessed in 544 at the tomb of Euthymius, who had been buried in 473, in the underground cave that had served him as a cell, took place as long after Euthymius' death as did any which Gregory witnessed among the tombs of Gaul. But the links between the generations were stronger in a world of great monasteries than they were

[18] See esp. Hillgarth (1987), which corrects Brown (1981) 18–127, and Delaplace (1992).

among the more hesitant Christian communities of Gaul. Memory was supported by the intense and stable relationship of spiritual fathers to their disciples: John the Hesychast, the spiritual father of Cyril, had himself been the spiritual son of Sabas, who had, in turn, been directed, in his choice of monastery, by none other than Euthymius. In the monastic foundations of the area, every rock, cave and wadi told its own, unmoving story of former ascetic occupants. As a result, Cyril, writing at the end of the reign of Justinian, was able to reach back into the very first decades of the fifth century (Cyr. Scyth. *V. Euthymii* 60).

When Gregory the Great wrote his *Dialogues* in Rome in 593/4 (a decade later, that is, than Gregory of Tours' *Libri Miraculorum*), he also found himself confronted with mere shards of local memory. Lombard invasions in the past twenty years had destroyed many of the sites that had once been associated with holy men. Benedict's Monte Cassino had been sacked; the sieve that hung in the church at Nursia as testimony to his first miracle had disappeared; Lombard raids had effectively wiped out the ecclesiastical organization of many of the cities of Campania and the Apennines that had boasted holy ascetics in more sheltered times. Though he claimed to write about the 'modern fathers' of Italy, Gregory looked back, in much of his *Dialogues*, across the chasm of the Lombard invasion to the stormy days of Totila's last stand against the Byzantine armies in 546–51 and even, further still, into the peaceful last decades of unchallenged Ostrogothic rule.[19] The days were long past when good bishop Boniface of Ferentis had provided a pair of Goths travelling to the court at Ravenna with a miraculously inexhaustible bottle of wine, and when the holy man Florentius sat quietly in the hills above Nursia, with a pet bear who knew the time of day (Greg. *Dial.* I.9.4; III.15.4). All this must have seemed poignantly distant to the beleaguered pope of the 590s.

Effectively wrenched, by warfare and emigration, from their local context, the memories that came to Gregory could be organized, by him, according to an 'oikotype' that existed, largely, in his own, resolutely Augustinian mind. The *Dialogues* took the form of a spiritual conversation between Gregory and his loyal friend, the Roman deacon Peter. No other writer of the age was in such a position, or had such a firm intention, to pass local narratives through a theological filter of so fine a mesh.[20]

With Gregory, miracles were far more than an occasion for vainglory – as they were also for Gregory of Tours – sensitive though he was to that aspect of the problem. They were *signa*, signals sent from a distant God through human agents on whom he had conferred the strictly temporary grace of the ability to work wonders and to see, with his own eyes, the hidden things of his providence. For Gregory, to be holy was to cling to

[19] A fact well seen by Cracco (1992). [20] McCready (1989).

God, to make his will one's own (Greg. *Dial.* II.23.1). Hence the deep religious dread that might fall on even the most supercilious observer of a holy man. Abbot Equitius, unselfconsciously tossing hay in his hobnailed boots, was a man who carried with him nothing less than the awesome weight of the presence of God (Greg. *Dial.* I.4.13–14). Yet Gregory was too loyal a follower of Augustine to believe that an alignment of the human will with that of God might never waver (Greg. *Dial.* II.16.7). No permanent and ever-increasing effervescence of the Holy Spirit could overcome the daily ruin of the ascetic's fallen human nature. Far from it: nothing was more calculated to upset the fragile equilibrium of the soul's commune with God than were those outward signs which, from time to time, God willed that a person of tested sanctity might perform for the good of others. Like the abrupt flashes of a signalling light, miracles could dazzle those who performed them, even while they arrested the attention of those stubborn minds who needed the physical challenge of a miracle.

In this attitude, Gregory reached back, through Augustine, to one of the most austerely intellectualist and anti-materialist traditions of late Platonism. To perform a miracle was to turn away from the inner, spiritual fire of contemplation, to view the fainter radiance of God's workings in the mere world of matter (Greg. *Moralia* II.91 and XXX.8). Prolonged engagement in the *publica operatio* of miracles was calculated to place the unreflective wonder-worker on the edge of a slippery slope. Miracles could be as certain a cause of the fall of the soul into the world of material cares as was the burden of public involvement in the fate of the church, under which, as bishop of Rome, Gregory himself had come to groan, like a giant straining beneath the oceanic weight of episcopal office. Yet, like bishops, miracles had their place in God's scheme for the human race, even in modern times. Gregory's unflinching sense of public mission was bolstered by a robust faith that, in a harmonious *cosmos*, material sign and spiritual reality were never utterly incommensurable: a miracle might point without ambiguity to the higher, more enduring, spiritual realities that it made visible, in a single, stunning moment of time.[21] Lingering with frank patriotism on the narratives of his native land, Gregory, for all his warnings to the less guarded Peter, allowed himself to take comfort in *tam iucunda miracula*, in so many, sweetly-tempered miracles that showed that God, at least, had not deserted Italy (Greg. *Dial.* III.22.4). Only in the chill shadow of the reign of Antichrist, by contrast with which even Gregory's own troubled times might seem, on looking back, times of deep peace, would the church have to face the world with mere words, stripped of its present dignity – the gift of miracles (Greg. *Moralia* XV.69; XIX.16; XXXII.24 and XXXIV.7).

[21] Straw (1988) 47–89.

A loyal, if careworn, subject of the east Roman emperors, Gregory had resided for some time in Constantinople. He knew that he did not write in a vacuum. He was careful to enunciate his own, distinctively Latin, 'dialect' of the holy with all the more clarity because he knew that other, subtly different variants of a Christian language of the holy existed in the east. What we find, above all in Syria, but also in Palestine, Egypt and a little later in Constantinople and Asia Minor, are dialects of the holy which, though they differed greatly among themselves, tended to differ even more from those current in the west. They invested living persons with a degree and, above all, with a stability of sanctity that men such as Gregory of Tours and even Gregory the Great preferred to ascribe only to the holy dead. Even when we make due allowance for the fact that much of our evidence reflects the state of mind of great pilgrimage sites, which needed to foster stable and generous expectations of the powers of their wonder-working heroes, we are confronted, in the hagiography of the eastern empire, with a significantly different view of the human person.

The great holy men of the eastern empire were, indeed, 'mourners'. They were penitents, publicly crushed beneath the weight of their own sins. Their fully visible self-mortifications played out, on a heroic scale, the contrition and profound sense of human frailty which every believer was expected to feel, but which few were called upon to experience with such exquisite sensibility. But repentance of epic dimensions was widely deemed to have brought holy persons to a state of loving familiarity with God. The veil which, since Adam's fall, had descended between mankind and the angelic hosts around the throne of God had been worn thin by their prayers. It had become transparent to their tear-worn eyes. Indeed, when Symeon Stylites first mounted his column at Telnesin and, a little later, began to sway backwards and forwards, bowing with a dizzying frequency that riveted the attention of all onlookers – a servant of Theodoret of Cyrrhus counted up to 1,244 such prostrations before giving up – it was because, clearly visible to Symeon, an angel was perpetually bowing in just the same manner before the eucharistic bread that was stored in a little stone niche on one side of his column (Theodoret, *HR* xxvi.22; *V. Sym. Syr.* 98, Doran (1992) 171–2).

For Symeon, perhaps, and certainly for those reared in a mature Syrian tradition who came to watch him, the holy man was, in himself, a 'living sign'. His dramatic way of life was more than the distant blink of a signal from God. It made present with almost perfect congruence in the visible world realities that usually lay beyond human sight. It is as if the angelic world itself had pushed through the veil, to become fully palpable in the figure perched on his column above the plain at Telnesin.[22]

[22] Harvey (1988), (1998).

For a human being to stand, in such an unambiguous manner, as an 'angel' among men required a gift of the Holy Spirit more all-consuming and definitive than that bestowed upon each Christian by the grace of baptism (or, to put it differently, a more robust emergence of that grace than was the case with the average believer). Belief in the fervour of the Spirit, that had stirred in Patricius on the coast of Mayo, was taken for granted in Syria. It rested on the firm foundations of a prestigious and long-established theological tradition. It was as bearers of the Holy Spirit, their whole nature 'mixed' with its inspiring energy as inseparably as the fragrance of myrrh penetrated the heavy oil base of a perfume, that Syrian Christians had been accustomed, for centuries, to make Christ present and palpable in this world.

As a result, claims to which Greek bishops had reacted with instant suspicion in the early fifth century, when made on behalf of nameless groups of believers – who earned from their enemies the heresiological label of 'Messalians' (persons who were held to believe that the deep-seated force of evil might be irrevocably driven from the human soul by unremitting, fervent prayer) – were taken for granted as underlying the spiritual achievements of the *nouvelle vague* of stylite hermits and, a little later, despite initial resistance, of the analogous Syrian phenomenon of the 'Sleepless' monks (monks, that is, devoted to unceasing prayer). The holy man settled down, throughout the eastern Mediterranean, as a 'licensed Messalian'.[23]

In both cases, practices that originated in Syria broke through previous cultural frontiers, creating an 'international style' of demonstrative Christian sanctity. 'Stylite', 'hermit' and 'recluse' tended to merge in the terminology of the times. They could be found everywhere. A female stylite is recorded outside Amasea (Amasya) in Pontus. In Egypt, a male stylite is found, according to one papyrus, arranging for a donkey driver to bring water in daily instalments to the monastery that had grown up, apparently at the foot of his column, at Antinoe. Far to the east, in the foothills of the Zagros mountains, Monophysite stylites perched ominously, 'like carrion vultures', on the edge of hostile Nestorian villages.[24] They had come to stay. Consulted by a Muslim leader in the course of the civil wars which accompanied the end of the Umayyad dynasty in the mid eighth century, a stylite attached to a Palestinian monastery answered:

> If I tell thee the truth, thou wilt slay me; yet I will declare what God has revealed to me. With the measure with which thou hast measured it shall be measured to thee.

He was proved right on both counts.

[23] Stewart (1991) and Escolan (1999).

[24] Anderson and Cumont (1910) no. 134, 146; *Papyri Greek and Egyptian: In Honour of Eric Gardiner Turner* (1981) no. 54, 198–203; Thomas of Marga, *Book of Governors* III.8, tr. E. A. W. Budge (London 1893) 330–3 and 363.

When Marwan heard this, he commanded that the pillar should be overthrown; and he brought down the old man, and burnt him alive in the fire.

(*History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* 1.18, ed. B. Evetts, *PO* v.156)

It is some indication of the shifting frontiers of many such Christian dialects of the holy that the *laus perennis*, the 'sleepless' chant of the monks, was soon established in Burgundy and in the Franche-Comté (then, as in the sixteenth century, a frontier zone of piety between the Mediterranean and the north).[25] By contrast, Wulfilaic, a Lombard holy man who had grown up in northern Italy, close to the Byzantine exarchate of Ravenna, received a cool reception in northern Gaul. The bishop of Trier told him to get off his column. There was no place for a *homo ignobilis* such as himself to become the Symeon Stylites of northern Gaul (Greg. Tur. *Hist.* VIII.15).

Given the nature of our sources, it is relatively easy to evoke the various, agreed local versions of the place that holy persons might occupy in the memory and expectations of distinct Christian regions. It is less easy to explain the rise and function of the holy man in terms of the wider social and religious world in which he was expected to be active. Here we are faced by a problem of perspective. The foreground of the life and activities of the holy man is supremely well known to us. Vivid and deliberately circumstantial evidence presents the holy man interacting with all manner of persons. The emphasis is placed on specific incidents of healing, good advice, cursing and successful intercession, both with God in heaven and with the powerful on earth. Yet, seen in terms of these sharply delineated actions, the holy man stands out, like a figure in a Chinese landscape, against an indistinct and seemingly measureless background. How to relate foreground and background, the known activities of the holy man with their wider social and religious implications; and hence how to explain their overall significance for contemporaries and their relative importance in relation to other forms of religious activity has remained a tantalizing problem. It is a problem that admits no single, unambiguous solution. Let us, therefore, begin with what is easiest to know, with the foreground.

It must never be forgotten that the holy man's activities, though usually presented in the sources as dramatic and exceptional, were no more than a highly visible peak in a spiritual landscape that rose gently upwards from the expectations and activities of ordinary Christians in towns and villages. A community of believers, endowed by baptism with the gift of the Holy Spirit, all Christians were potentially 'holy'. In late antique conditions, this fact was expected to be shown by the possession of spiritual powers. To take one well-known example: Augustine's mother, Monica, took for granted that she would receive God-given, premonitory dreams; and

[25] Wood (1981) 16.

Augustine himself believed that he had been cured of toothache by the prayers of his friends at Cassiciacum, not all of whom were even baptized (Aug. *Conf.* VI.xiii.23 and IX.iv.12). What Christian writers felt that they needed to explain was not so much the miraculous gifts of the holy man but, rather, why such gifts appeared to contemporaries to have drained away from the average members of the community of believers on to the persons of a few recipients of divine *charismata* (*Apostolic Constitutions* VIII.1: *PG* 1.1061).

Low profile and intermittent expectations of help and comfort from religious persons (pious men and women and members of the local clergy) remained usual in any Christian community. The 'religious person', the *vir religiosus*, the *femina religiosa*, was watched carefully by his or her neighbours for evidence of virtue and, hence, of spiritual powers that might prove useful to others. A layman complained to Barsanuphius about himself that his retiring disposition, his unwillingness to get involved in local politics and his unusual sexual modesty when visiting the public baths had already given him an embarrassing reputation for being a holy person (Barsanuphius, *Correspondance* 771, Regnault (1971) 472). The further step, to a demand for a show of spiritual power, was a short one. Faced by a nest of angry wasps, the harvesters of Besne, near Nantes, turned to Friardus, half in jest and half in earnest:

> Let the religious fellow come, the one who is always praying, who makes the sign of the cross on his eyes and ears, who crosses himself whenever he goes out of the house. (Greg. Tur. *Vita Patrum* X.1)

Only Friardus had the power to halt wasps.

Healing substances circulated freely. 'Oil of prayer' could be obtained from the lamps around the altar of any number of churches, and might be applied with the prayers of any person with even a moderate reputation for holiness.[26] In his exile in Amasea (Amasya, Turkey) the patriarch Eutychius of Constantinople settled down in his monastery to function, in a small way, as a wonder-worker. A man blinded for perjury was healed by the prayers of Eutychius after three days of anointing with oil. A woman who had difficulties with breast-feeding ended up being able to act as wet-nurse to all the children of her neighbourhood (Eustratius, *V. Eutychii* 58 and 60: *PG* LXXXVI.2.2340A and 2341C).

In this world of unspectacular but constant resort to persons with a reputation for sanctity, women, in certain regions, could be quite as important as men, if not more so. Living at home or in convents close to the city or village, safely protected from the very real dangers of the wild in which holy men were supposed to gain their sanctity, holy women were as central to

[26] Till (1960) no. 261, 64.

the supernatural economy of any settled community as was the local well. It was increasingly difficult to believe that men who had not, at some time, vanished into the antithesis of settled life could be fully holy. But women could not vanish from society in this way. Hence the peculiar charge of the holy woman. Profound sanctity and efficacy in prayer was, as it were, trapped by the constraints of society, in an almost uncanny manner, just around the corner. It was enough to look down 'with worldly thoughts' from one's rooftop on to Modegundis at prayer, in her back garden in Tours, to be struck blind (Greg. Tur. *Vita Patrum* XIX.1).

Female sanctity was an essential feature of urban life. It was good to come with other married women on Fridays and Saturdays to listen to Febronia read the scriptures in the chapel attached to the local convent (*V. Febroniae* 1.6: *Acta Sanctorum, Jun. V.* 19B, tr. Brock and Harvey (1987) 155). It was reassuring for the *matronae* of Paris to join Genovefa in the baptistery of the cathedral, to hold vigil as the Hunnish armies swept across the plains of Champagne (*V. Genovefae* 12, ed. Krusch 219). Pious women, quite as much as men, were indispensable nodal points, who transmitted the energy of their prayers to a continuous circuit of well-known healing substances, words and gestures which ran through every Christian neighbourhood. A vine leaf moistened with her spittle and the sign of the cross made by her fingers were enough to cure a little boy brought to Modegundis of an agonizing stomach ache (Greg. Tur. *Vita Patrum* XIX.3).

Thus, when believers went out to a holy man, they often travelled considerable distances and arrived at a site associated, whenever possible, with the wild antithesis to the settled land. They came as pilgrims, to find

> in a 'far' milieu, the basic elements and structures of [their] faith in their unshielded, virgin radiance.[27]

What they usually got, in fact, was 'home cooking'. The supplicants of holy men received exactly the same banal remedies for their ills as circulated at home. But these were now applied by hands known without doubt to be holy, at a place shorn of the disillusionments of everyday life. Precisely because he was thought to be a 'living sign', the holy man could make present to the believer the fiery angels who were forever transparent to his own eyes. Solemn angelic figures, that now stood largely unheeded on the walls of the local churches, became, for an instant, present and active in the sufferer's cure (*V. Sym. Jun.* 39, ed. Van den Ven (1962) 39).

It was the same with the words of the holy man. Any student of the spirituality of the Christian east, as it achieved classical form in this period, knows the primary importance of the link between spiritual father and disciple in the monastic tradition. Centuries of late classical and Christian

[27] Turner and Turner (1978) 15.

thought on self-formation had produced the conclusion that full knowledge of the self was possible only for those who were prepared, as spiritual sons, to see their own souls through the quiet eyes of an Old Man.[28] The Old Man alone, wrote John of Gaza to a monk in an adjoining monastery, 'is absolutely not the plaything of demons' (Barsanuphius, *Correspondance* 373, Regnault (1971) 263). Such guidance usually took place within the narrow confines of a given monastery or monastic region. But what holy men such as Barsanuphius and John could do at Gaza, and what Epiphanius did at Thebes in upper Egypt, was to place their authoritative words at the disposition of a far wider variety of questioners. In a world where the primary division was not that between the monastery and the world, or between the clergy and the laity, but the existential chasm between religious persons and the vast majority who had neither the leisure nor the inclination for such matters, it was usual for any outstanding person or monastic establishment to function as a 'monastery without walls' for a wide network of religiously-minded clients 'in the world'.

Holy men might receive desperate requests for help of every kind, from words of comfort and prayer to God to direct intervention with the authorities. This is shown by the *ostraka* found in the monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes. A woman whose husband had been carried off by the barbarians wrote:

> Be so good, let thy compassion reach me . . . for my heart is flown forth from me.
> (Crum and Evelyn-White (1926) no. 170, p. 199)

An elderly priest also approached the hermit:

> broken, lying abed, being carried in and out . . . A great grief is in my heart, night and day . . . be so kind as to appoint for me prayers and a [regime of fasting] convenient to my sickness and old age, and even be it lying down, I will fulfil them.
> (Crum and Evelyn-White (1926) no. 11, p. 195)

It was from the Old Men, Barsanuphius and John, that the Christian notables of the Gaza region received advice on all manner of topics. The codes of Christian deportment proposed in these letters represent the late flowering of a very ancient *délicatesse*, issuing now with supernatural authority from behind the permanently closed doors of the cell of an Egyptian recluse. Not least of the good advice provided by the Old Men concerned dealings with non-Christians. Should a landowner place his wine press at the disposal of a Jewish neighbour?

> If, when it rains, God causes the rain to fall on your fields and not on those of the Jew, then you also can refuse to press his wine. But as he is full of love for all mankind . . . why should you wish to be inhumane rather than merciful?
> (Barsanuphius, *Correspondance* 686, Regnault (1971) 441)

[28] Brown, 'Asceticism pagan and Christian', in *CAH* XIII, 601–31.

The Great Old Man even provided a specimen letter, declining with civility an invitation from a notable to a festival in which acts of non-Christian worship might take place:

> Say to him: 'Your Charity knows that those who fear God hold to his commands; and your own habits are to hand to convince you of that, because your own affection for me would never cause you to transgress the precepts of your own ancestral tradition.' (Barsanuphius, *Correspondance* 776, Regnault (1971) 475)

One should have no illusions on one point. As in all other periods of the ancient world, to cultivate mentors of this kind required wealth and leisure. Holy men were often appropriated by well-to-do persons. The peasants of Lipidiacum wanted to keep the body of Lupicinus, a 'living martyr' whose bloody spittle, the result of his austerities, they would scrape from the walls of his cell as a healing substance. But the body of the dead saint was impounded by a 'respectable woman' from neighbouring Trézelle (Allier): for she claimed it on the strength of having fed the saint from the produce of her villa when he was alive (Greg. Tur. *Vita Patrum* XIII.3).

All over the Christian world, notables collected holy men, drawing constantly on their services and, in turn, contributing to their upkeep and their reputation. Archesilaus of Caesarea Maritima remembered how Zosimas, a hermit from outside Tyre, was staying with him when the saint burst into tears, flooding the pavement of Archesilaus' town house. For Zosimas had heard the roar of the collapse of Antioch in the earthquake of 526. The holy man instantly called for a censer and filled the building with perfume, so as to render it immune from a similar fate. When Archesilaus' wife injured her eye with an embroidery needle, Zosimas stood by, praying and advising the surgeons who handled the injury. But Zosimas declared that it was another friend of the family, John of Choziba, four hundred *stadia* away in the desert of Judaea, to whom God had finally 'given the grace' of healing the injury: it was to John's prayers that he had listened (Evagr. *HE* IV.7).

As a result of patronage by the great, holy men and their disciples found themselves in a situation that generated permanent anxiety. They were frequently settled on marginal lands. They usually drew to themselves, in the heyday of their reputation, large bands of disciples and crowds of pilgrims, many of whom stayed for long periods in their presence. If successful, they required permanent facilities – such as buildings, a water supply and large surpluses of food and money for the poor, the sick and the many strangers. Altogether, the holy man came to weigh heavily on the most vulnerable tracts of the ecology of his region. There was never much wealth or land to go round, even in the most prosperous regions of the late Roman world. There is hardly a single account of the successful establishment of a holy man, from the autobiography of Valerius of Bierzo in seventh-century

Galicia,[29] through Benedict and his enemy, the priest Florentius, at Subiaco (Greg. *Dial.* II.8.1–4), to the three thousand monks settled in the Judaean desert,[30] the huge convents outside Amida (all too easily devastated when the Chalcedonian authorities cut off the food supplies usually offered to them by a devout laity),[31] to Nestorian convents in northern Iraq, regularly pillaged by the Kurds (Thomas of Marga, *The Book of Governors* V.17, tr. E. A. W. Budge (London 1893) 563), where we do not meet examples of savage competition for scarce resources, waged between the new ascetic settlements and local leaders, clergy and villagers. When it came to the issue of oblations – the gifts of agrarian produce and of other forms of wealth (including, of course, small children) offered to the holy man in exchange for his blessing – the assertion of holiness almost invariably locked the saint and his disciples (usually more zealous in this matter than their master) into a zero-sum game.[32]

Holy men were frequently dependent on patronage – and often on the crushing patronage of emperors, kings and great landowners. They had to justify their position by standing, in the eyes of the world, as the quintessence of good patronage. Hence the vividness and circumstantiality of those accounts which show holy men rebuking the rich, protecting peasants from extortion, arbitrating in local disputes, and facing down high-ranking officials, even the emperor himself, in the name of the poor, the oppressed and the condemned. As a result, it has proved tempting to explain the rise and function of the holy man in many regions of the Christian world in terms of the manner in which holy men were believed by their admirers to have played the role of 'the "good patron" writ large'.[33]

To arrive at a more balanced view of the matter, it is worth while stressing the overall tendency of the sources in which these incidents occur. It was a tendency to render innocent the undoubted wealth and influence of the holy man's 'establishment'. Put briefly: hagiography achieved its effect by censoring one side of the gift exchange that took place around the holy man – the steady, even disquieting, flow of gifts and favours from the outside world that gave the holy man's activities their appropriate degree of splendour and public recognition. It presented the holy man's activities in terms of the other side of that exchange – the seemingly effortless, 'gravity-free'

[29] Valerius of Bierzo, *Ordo Quaeremoniae* and *Replicatio*, ed. Aherne (1949).

[30] A world now brought alive by Hirschfeld (1992).

[31] John Eph. *Lives of the Eastern Saints* 35, *PO* XVIII.607–20; *Chronicon pseudo-Dionysianum* III.8, tr. R. Hespel, *CSCO* 507, *Script. Syri* 213 (Louvain 1989) 27–8; see also Palmer (1990).

[32] *V. Sym. Jun.* 130, Van den Ven (1962) 122: a Georgian priest who had set up a healing shrine with a *hnana* of Symeon was accused of working miracles through sorcery by the priests whose *karpophoriai* had been intercepted by his shrine.

[33] Brown, 'Holy man' 91 (now in Brown, *Society and the Holy* 129) succumbed with gusto to that temptation. What follows should be read as a corrective to the views advanced in that article: see also Brown (1983) 10–13, (1998), with Howard-Johnston and Hayward (1999) and Lane Fox (1997).

flow of divine favours, of acts of successful arbitration, plain speaking and intercession on behalf of the community as a whole (as in times of drought) that came from God through the holy man. To be content with one small, but revealing example. By the 580s, visitors to Symeon the Younger on the *Mons Admirabilis*, the Wonder-filled Mountain, outside Antioch (present-day Samandağı, Symeon's mountain), could not but have been impressed by a complex of buildings at the foot of the column of the saint, the splendour of whose surviving capitals alone reflected a *koine* of near eastern princely art that stretched from Constantinople to Kermanshah. Such building, however, so the biographers of Symeon insisted, was the product of Isaurian workers who had worked solely out of gratitude to the saint for the healings that he had bestowed on them.[34] In the same way, the wealth associated with the growing establishment of the holy man (especially as this was continued, after his death, by a monastic community) and the support offered to him in his lifetime by leading persons were frequently explained, in hagiographic sources, by reference to some incident in which an important person, standing for the wealth and power of 'the world' in its most obtrusive and darkened form, was humbled by the holy man through some miracle. Frequently this miracle was performed on behalf of the poor who had sought the saint's protection against the powerful person in question. Wealth that came to the holy man's establishment was made 'clean' in this way, by a dramatic story in which the giver of the wealth was first 'taught a lesson' by the saint.[35] Given this situation, it has been rightly observed that, by the sixth century, the miracle had become 'the specific, quasi-institutional mode of action' through which the holy man impinged on the world.[36]

Altogether, holy men tended to be remembered as having been effectively active in society in a manner that fulfilled, with satisfying congruence, the expectations of any other great patron. They frequently did so in areas which the historian now knows to have been characterized by a vigorous rural population which had taken ever more marginal land into cultivation. This is the case with the astonishing late Roman villages of northern Syria and with the large churches perched on what is now the boar-infested plateau of Karabel above Myra (Demre, Turkey) in Lycia.[37] But we must always remember that the very success of the holy man left his disciples with much to explain. The fact that they did so, and with gusto, in terms of a carefully censored language of 'clean' patronage does not mean that patronage in itself explains the holy man. It is, rather, to the wider features of the religious world in which the holy man moved that we

[34] *V. Sym. Jun.* 96, Van den Ven (1962) 74–5; see Van den Ven (1962) II.92–3, who shares my scepticism. On the buildings, see Djobadze, (1986) 57–114.

[35] Similar narratives concerning the wealth of modern Islamic holy men have been acutely observed by Gilsenan (1982) 102–3. [36] Flusin (1983) 208.

[37] Tate (1992); Harrison (1963); Fowden (1990b).

must turn. Let us conclude, therefore, by sketching, inevitably very briefly, the role of the holy man as 'arbiter of the holy' – that is, as one significant actor among many in the slow and hesitant process of the creation of a Christian 'thought world'.

The Christian holy man emerged at a crucial moment in the overall religious history of post-imperial western Europe and the Byzantine middle east. He was a figure of genuine spiritual power at a time when the holy stretched far beyond the somewhat narrow confines of the triumphant Christian church. It is no coincidence that a figure of the stature of Symeon Stylites should have appeared in northern Syria at just the time when the ecclesiastical structures of the region had been in place for some generations, when the pagan temples had been officially closed for a quarter of a century, but where a strong form of local religious leadership had not yet arisen to negotiate an honourable surrender for the gods. Firmly placed on a column which in itself may have linked his person to ancient memories of holy stones,[38] administering banal and widely-recognized forms of blessing (the *hnana* of the dust from the sacred enclosure beneath his column), summoning local church congregations through their priests to what amounted to gigantic revivalist meetings associated with Christian penitential supplication, Symeon stood on the low slopes of the limestone ridge as a highly personalized challenge to the ancient pilgrimage site on top of Sheikh Barakat. Despite the splendid buildings that were lavished on it after his death, it is not the relatively low-lying area of Telnesin, but the conical shape of Sheikh Barakat that still catches the eye of the traveller in the Jebel Sem'an as it towers with an immemorial sacrality above the plain of Dana. In a similar manner, the column of Symeon's later imitator, Symeon the Younger, holds in view – but now at eye-level – the opposing peak of the oracle of Zeus on Mount Kasios.

Symeon negotiated many surrenders of the gods. Bedouin tribesmen burned their idols in his presence (Theodoret, *HR* xxvi.13). Whole villages entered into a 'covenant' with him. A polytheist village in the mountains of Lebanon was told that, if they followed his commands by placing stones carved with the sign of the cross or blessed by portions of his holy dust on the four corners of their fields, and if they destroyed their shrines and household idols, they would enjoy protection from creatures of the wild – from werewolves and ravenous field mice (*V. Sym. Syr.* 61 and 63, Doran (1992) 141 and 143, with comments on 22–3). A century later, villages touched by the ministrations of Symeon the Younger did not abruptly convert from 'paganism' to 'Christianity'. Rather, in a Christian empire that had used many forms of cultural and physical violence against polytheists,

[38] Frankfurter (1990).

the villagers were edged, a little more gently, through a language of sacred violence associated with the blessing and cursing of the wonder-working child-saint in the mountain above them, towards 'behaving a little more like Christians', *χριστιανοπρεπῶς πολιτεύεσθαι* (*V. Sym. Jun.* 221 and 223, Van den Ven (1962) 191 and 194; cf. 188–20, Van den Ven (1962) 166–9). When the formidable Shenoute of Atripe prophesied to the villagers of Sment in upper Egypt that they would lose their gods, they assumed the worst: 'A governor will surely come and will oppress us' (Till (1936) 65). Instead they got Apa Moyses, whose violence, though spectacular and disastrous for their temples, partook in an ancient language of the sacred, which rendered defeat, if not palatable, at least meaningful.

It is for this reason that, all over the Christian world, the countryside in particular became 'the locus for the elaboration of cultic choices'.[39] For, unlike the European missionaries of a later age, the Christian holy men and women of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages

> appeared as representatives of a power superior to that of traditional faiths, but not as purveyors of a dramatically different world view or type of religion.[40]

Filled with the Holy Spirit and more certain than were most Christians of their position in a hierarchy of heavenly powers, in alliance with which they upheld the claims of Christ, their God, holy men (unlike those of us who usually study them) knew spiritual power when they saw it. They frequently engaged it at dangerously close quarters. Not only were long and intimate duels with the local sorcerer almost *de rigueur* in the life of a successful saint; sometimes one senses that the one is a doublet, rather than an enemy, of the other (e.g. *V. Theod. Syk.* 37–8, ed. Festugière (1970) 32–4). At Néris, in the Berry, Patroclus found himself faced at the time of the bubonic plague of 571 by a woman, Leubella, who had received from 'the devil, falsely appearing as saint Martin . . . offerings which would, he said, save the people'. But Patroclus himself had almost succumbed to the temptation to come down from the hills to save the people as a wonder-worker. Only after he received a vision of the 'abominations' of the world to which he had been tempted to return did he go back to his cell, to find genuine 'offerings' – 'a tile on which was the sign of the Lord's cross' (Greg. Tur. *Vita Patrum* IX.2).

What is often ascribed, in the more pensive and monastically orientated sources of the time, to the unhinging effects of *elatio*, of spiritual vainglory, that led to madness in many failed wonder-workers, refers to a far more gripping and specifically late antique phenomenon than mere conceit. We are dealing with figures for whom the boundaries between exorcism and possession, between power over spirits and a quasi-shamanistic power

[39] Boesch-Gajano (1991) 115. [40] Kaplan (1984) 115.

through possession by spirits, were far more fluid than our texts would lead us to suppose.[41] Driven by the torrent of cultic experimentation that raced through many Christian regions, it is not surprising that the mills of hagiographical literature should have come to turn so briskly towards the end of this period, in an effort to reduce the raw grain of so many, frequently ambiguous, experiences of the holy to the fine flour of a few, dominant Christian 'oikotypes'. Such experimentation would not have aroused so much interest if it had occurred only among the peasantry. What was at stake was the putting in order of a Christian 'thought-world' that was, if anything, a more urgent matter for the well-to-do than for the peasantry. The wealthy and the educated were the patrons of holy men and the readers of accounts of their lives. Seen in this light, the activities of the holy man, and especially the manner in which these were recounted in retrospect, represent one stage in the long schooling of the imagination of all classes in late antiquity.

The average well-to-do and thoughtful person lived in many 'thought-worlds'.[42] Potentially exclusive explanatory systems coexisted in his or her mind. The host of the monk Peter the Iberian, an eminent Egyptian, was a good Christian; but he was also 'caught in the error of pagan philosophers, whose ideas he loved greatly' (*V. Petri Iberi*, ed. R. Raabe, Leipzig 1895 72). He employed a magician to cure his daughter. Nor were these systems parallel. They often interlocked as separate parts of a single process of cure. A notable of Alexandria could go to the healing shrine of Sts Cyrus and John to receive a cure from their hands. But he claimed to have done so 'in order that his horoscope should be fulfilled' (*Miracula SS. Cyri et Johannis* 28. 8, *PG* LXXXVII.3504B; and ed. N. Fernandez Marcos (Madrid 1975) 296).

Holy men themselves did not see the matter in terms of a sharp antithesis of Christian and non-Christian. They belonged to a category of persons who were assumed by their supplicants to have access to knowledge of the holy in all its manifestations. The expectations of the neighbourhood committed them to far more than an exclusively Christian art of prayer. A respected saint was a person who was allowed to have the last word in what was usually a long and well-informed discussion of supernatural causality, in which everyone had a say. When Theodore of Sykeon was conceived, his mother, Maria, dreamed that a brilliant star had descended into her womb. Her lover (an acrobatic camel-rider on an imperial mission) was delighted. She would have a baby boy, he said, who would become a bishop. Next, Maria went to a holy man with second sight in a neighbouring village. He concurred.

[41] A gripping incident in John Eph. *Lives of the Eastern Saints* 15, *PO* XVII.223–7; John Moschus in *BZ* XXXVIII (1938) 360; Barsanuphius, *Correspondance* 843, Regnault (1971) 501.

[42] This is made particularly clear by Dagron (1981).

A star [he told her] is held to signify the glory of an emperor by those who are expert in interpreting visions; but with you it must not mean this.

Also consulted by Maria, the bishop of Anastasiopolis, 'by God's inspiration, gave her the same interpretation' (*V. Theod. Syk.* 4, ed. Festugière (1970) 4, tr. Dawes and Baynes (1997) 88–9). When Theodore, sure enough, grew up to be both a bishop and a holy man, he functioned in a similar manner:

if any required medical treatment for certain illnesses or surgery or a purging draught or hot springs, this God-inspired man would prescribe the best thing for each, for even in technical matters he had become an experienced doctor . . . and he would always state clearly which doctor they should employ.

(*V. Theod. Syk.* 145, ed. Festugière (1970) 114, Dawes and Baynes (1977) 182; cf. Harvey (1984) 87–93)

Nor did the information flow only in one direction. Viewing the crowds of sufferers around the shrine of St Epiphanius at Salamis in the early seventh century, a 'philosopher' informed the bishop that the majority of those present would be cured by a simple change in diet. Responsible for a crowded healing establishment, the bishop agreed. The philosopher's remedy worked wonders (Anastasius Sinaita, *Quaestiones* 94, *PG* LXXXIX.733A). We know of this from the *Quaestiones* of Anastasius of Sinai, a monastic writer whose highly nuanced discussion of divine providence, health and miracles contains, also, the first disturbing hint of yet another rival explanatory system – that of Islam. Anastasius knew how Arabs could tell from physiognomic traits which of their warriors would die – presumably as a 'martyr' – in battle; and he had heard of the great she-demon who rose from the earth to devour the camel-sacrifices heaped up around the Kaʿba of Mecca (Anastasius Sinaita, *Quaestiones* 20, *PG* LXXXIX.521A; Flusin (1991) 404–5).

In normal conditions, the varying layers of explanation tended to group themselves around the holy man, much as the manifold invisible powers of the universe, even the demons, fell into ranks beneath the one God whom he served. But the possibility of conflict was always present, in which these many layers would fall apart into sharply polarized antithesis. The most banal of these moments of conflict concerned the use of sorcery. This is hardly surprising. Within the Christian community itself, members of the clergy, like the holy man, were frequently deemed to be bearers of comprehensive knowledge of the sacred. Many had knowledge of sorcery. Clergy and lay persons alike were urged to use accustomed Christian healing substances and, above all, to employ names and formulae that were to be found only in the canonical Christian scriptures (Greg. Tur. *De Gloria Confessorum* 1 and 39). But it was far from certain that such a seemingly innocent substance as the 'oil of prayer' would be energized by Christian prayers or by invocations considered to be tainted by sorcery

(Shenoute, *Contra Origenistas* 259, ed. T. Orlandi (Rome 1985) 19; cf. Kropp (1930) 120).

Though presented as a defence of the faith against 'heathen' customs, and couched in terms of exhortations directed principally at a Christian laity deemed to be more mired in non-Christian habits than were their leaders, the long war on sorcery within the Christian community often took the form of an internecine feud between rival experts on the sacred among the monks and clergy themselves. It was a Great Old Man, and not a pagan sorcerer, not even a Christian layman, who shocked Shenoute of Atripe by recommending a jackal's claw tied to his right toe as the correct remedy for his client, a Christian governor (Shenoute, *Contra Origenistas* 821, Orlandi 62). The middle age of Theodore of Sykeon was troubled by an influential priest, a great sorcerer and philanderer, known as 'the Billy Goat of Bithynia' (*V. Theod. Syk.* 159, Festugière (1970) 134).

Deadly conflict between members of the clerical élites on theological issues caused the overlapping systems of explanation to explode. Sorcery alone could explain the miracles of theological opponents. In the stormy ecclesiastical history of the fifth and sixth century, we rarely find a holy man of an opposing party who is not dismissed at one time or another by his rivals as a mere sorcerer.[43] Occasionally we come upon a precious moment when a community, as a whole, was forced to make up its mind as to the meaning of an untoward event. Only then do we realize the freedom of manoeuvre enjoyed by late Roman persons within the interstices of the explanatory systems that jostled at the back of their minds. When, in 420, the monk Fronto challenged local noble families and clergy at Tarragona on an inconclusive charge of sorcery, a servant of count Asterius burst into the crowded basilica with an armed retinue. Pointing at Fronto, he roared:

> Give me that dog. I will stop his barking . . .

That evening, the servant died of a stroke.

> When this happened, all the faithful, frightened by the obvious power of this sign, ceased to attack me for a little while. But my enemies and the count's whole household . . . demanded that I be punished as a murderer, since I had killed a man with death-dealing spells. There were even a few of those, totally lacking in faith, who said that it had all happened by coincidence. (Aug. *Ep.* 11*.13)

Such uncertainty was not surprising. For many late antique Christians, the sacred was profoundly faceless and ill-defined. Illusion was always possible. The Great Old Men of the desert had fostered a view of the untrans-

[43] Barsauma denounced by the emperor Marcian: Nau (1913) 130; Zu'ura denounced by pope Agapetus: John Eph. *Lives of the Eastern Saints* 2, *PO* XVII.27. The Nestorians were convinced that the Monophysites had replaced the relics of Mar Mattai by a sorcery-idol: *The History of Rabban Hormizd* XVI, tr. E. A. W. Budge (London 1902) 120.

formed human consciousness as a fragile thing, perpetually ringed by demonic mirages. In dreams the demons could take the form of holy figures, Barsanuphius told a worried layman: only the sign of the cross they could not bring themselves to imitate (Barsanuphius, *Correspondance* 416, Regnault (1971) 290). Not every miracle that happened was a true miracle. The power of the demons, and the imminent presence of Antichrist, had deprived mankind of the binocular vision needed to discriminate between holiness and illusion. In the 430s, a monk appeared in Carthage. He applied to the sick oil poured over the bone of a martyr.

> He brought hallucinations to play on the blind and the sick . . . so that they thought that they had recovered their sight and ability to walk. But in departing from him, the illnesses in whose grip they were held remained.
>
> (Quodvultdeus, *Liber promissionum* VI.6.11)

He left the city in a hurry. Yet just such cures, also performed with the 'oil of saints', only a generation later made the reputation of Daniel, a Syrian recluse and later a famous stylite, established beside the busy ferry across the Bosphorus (near Arnavutköy and Rumeli Hısar) a little to the north of Constantinople (*V. Danielis* 29, with Festugière (1961) II.111 n. 41). Epidemics of healing could be demonically inspired. They might be provoked by false relics – that is, by relics associated with rival Christian factions – such as was the 'polluted' oil left by mistake by a Monophysite monk in the chapel of a great Nestorian monastery (Thomas of Marga, *Book of Governors* VI.6; Budge 612–14). A stampede of sick persons to a holy man might be no more than a plot on the part of the demons to disturb the peace of his monastery (John Eph. *Lives of the Eastern Saints* 4, *PO* XVII.65).

Belief was never an easy matter, and in times of acute crisis the explanatory system which usually rested on the figure of the Christian holy man might collapse like a pack of cards. A massive public catastrophe, such as the onslaught of the plague, swamped the ministrations of the holy man. It was reassuring to believe that the cloth from the tomb of St Remigius, carried in a litter around Rheims, had created a sacred circuit that held the bubonic plague away from the city (Greg. Tur. *De Gloria Confessorum* 77). But Rheims was fortunate. When the plague first struck the eastern Mediterranean in 542, resort to the prayers of the saints was not the only – indeed, not the first – reflex of the afflicted populations. Demons in the form of angels appeared in Palestine, urging the inhabitants of one city to resume the worship they had once paid to a prominent bronze statue. Elsewhere, the word got round that

> If one throws pots out of the house the plague will go from the city,

so that it became unsafe to walk in the streets by reason of the crockery raining down from every window (*Chronicum Anonymum pseudo-Dionysianum*, tr. R. Hespel, *CSCO* 507, *Script. Syri* 213 (Louvain 1989) 64–5 and 81, trans. Witakowski (1996) 79 and 97).

Such incidents were not simply moments of regression in the face of overwhelming, but mercifully infrequent, catastrophe. It is important to realize how little of the public space of late Roman society was occupied by Christian holy persons. The solid gold of demonstrative sanctity was spectacular; but it circulated in strictly delimited channels in what had remained, to an overwhelming extent, a supernatural 'subsistence economy', accustomed to handling life's doubts and cares according to more old-fashioned and low-key methods. To take one example: the high drama associated with the healing of the mentally disturbed through exorcism brought into peculiarly sharp focus the particular 'style' of supernatural power associated with effective Christian sanctity. For that reason, it bulks large in all hagiographic literature. But exorcism never achieved exclusive dominance in the thought-world of contemporaries, nor, when it happened, was it always perceived in the highly dramatic terms favoured by Christian narratives of the display of spiritual power. Many of the exorcistic gestures associated with holy men such as St Martin grew naturally out of recognizable medical practices. Those in a position to visit a shrine or a holy person associated with exorcism would, in any case, have been a small proportion of the population.[44]

As for the theological controversies that rocked the eastern empire in the fifth and sixth century, Christian holy men played an important role in the mobilization of local opinion on either side – all the more so as many influential lay persons made the habit of taking the eucharist only from the 'blessed' hands of known holy men (John Rufus, *Plerophoriae* 22 and 33, *PO* VIII.40 and 75; John Moschus, *Pratum Spirituale* 188, *PG* LXXXVII.3065D). But their opinions on theology carried little weight with the experts on such matters. Considering a theological dictum ascribed to St Spyridon of Cyprus, the great Monophysite theologian Severus of Antioch observed drily that, while Spyridon might have received the 'gift of healing', the holy old man had evidently not received the 'gift of wisdom' (Severus Antioch. *Liber contra impium grammaticum* III.39, tr. J. Lebon, *CSCO* 102, *Script. Syri* 51 (Louvain 1952) 181).

Deeply conscious of the ambiguity of the sacred and fully aware of the limits of its field of action in a complex world, the society that turned to Christian holy persons was more niggardly than our hagiographic sources might lead us, at first sight, to suppose in lavishing credulity upon them. But when they did, they were encouraged to 'stylize' their imagination of the workings of the supernatural in a highly specific way. The holy man was a 'servant' of his God. He was also a 'patron' in that he offered petitions to God on behalf of others. His actions assumed, at a profound level, that the events of this world were the product of conflicting wills (in which

[44] Rousselle (1990) 109–86 and Horden (1993) are decisive on this issue.

conflict, the supremely wilful envy of the demons played a crucial role) and that true order meant the ultimate submission of all wills to God, the supreme emperor of the universe. The intimacy of holy persons with their Lord could be as tender as that of a son, a familiar friend, even of a lover. But the overwhelming weight of language, in our texts, presented the holy man in his public *persona* as a courtier. For many regions, this attitude involved far more than an unthinking projection on to the invisible world of the observed working of patronage within the centralized structures of the later Roman empire. To see the invisible world in these clear-cut terms involved making conscious choices between available religious traditions. In 370 Athanasius wrote that, of course, dreams of the future can be vouchsafed to Christian devotees at the shrines of the martyrs. What mattered was how this happened. Many Egyptian Christians seem to have assumed that the martyrs, as 'unconquered' heroes who had overcome the demons of the lower air by their heroic deaths, could now be prevailed upon, by the prayers of believers, to torture the demons yet further (in a long Egyptian tradition, by which higher gods bullied and threatened their subordinates) to reveal their own unearthly knowledge of the future. It was not like that, Athanasius insisted. God sent the dreams because the martyrs acted as ambassadors – *etreupresbeue* – who bore the prayers of the faithful to his court (Athanasius, *Festal Letters*, ed. T. Lefort, *CSCO* 150/151, *Script. Coptici* 19/20 (Louvain 1955) 65/46–7).

The language of patronage at a distant court, of course, had its limits. Only simple folk in Egypt believed, on the strength of an imperial model of the supernatural world, that the Archangel Michael, rather than having been forever present in his mighty role from the first dawn of the creation, had ousted Satan in a *coup d'état* in the palace of heaven; and consequently that, like any other Roman consul, Michael was obliged to scatter the benefits of healing upon his people on the day of his festival, which was, of course, the day when he had received from God the formal scroll of his appointment.[45] But the emphasis on the clash of free wills implied in this model brought a quality of mercy into an otherwise inflexible and potentially profoundly impersonal *cosmos*.

With the notion of freedom came also the notion of sin. The holy man was not only a favoured courtier of the distant emperor of heaven, he was a preacher of repentance. Dramatic changes in health; dramatic changes in the weather; dramatic shifts in the locus of wealth, as gold, precious objects, robes, land, even small children passed from the world to the monastic establishments associated with holy persons: all these highly visible changes were held to have registered the most amazing of all discontinuities – the stirring to contrition of the sinful human heart.

[45] Van Lantschoot (1946).

The great *Lives* of the holy men leave us in no doubt as to that basic Christian oikotype. It did not coincide with other notions of the sacred that were widespread at the time. Some time after the middle of the fifth century, Athens was afflicted by a drought. Rising to the occasion, the great non-Christian philosopher Proclus brought down the rain. The mysterious drone of the sacred bull-roarer, swung above the city by the wise man, restored the burning elements to their harmonious pitch. Himself already something of a lesser god, Proclus' soul was co-opted, through these rites, into the quiet and immemorial routine of government, by which the presiding spirits of a small part of the *cosmos* nurtured the sweet air of his beloved Attica (Marinus, *Vita Procli* 28). For a moment, Proclus joined himself to the loving care of the gods; he did not bow, as a courtier and a sinner, before the sole emperor of heaven.

A few decades earlier, drought had fallen also on the region of Jerusalem. The processions of Christian villagers, bearing crosses and chanting *Kyrie eleison*, that converged on the monastery of the great Euthymius were treated to a very different view of the universe.

> 'God, Who fashioned us, is good and benevolent, and *His pity extends over all His works*. But [Euthymius added] *our sins stand between us and Him* . . . This is why in His anger He has brought this correction upon us, so that, disciplined by it, and bettered by repentance, we may approach Him in fear and He accordingly may hear us.' On hearing this, they all cried out in unison. 'You yourself, venerable father, must entreat God for us.' [Euthymius then] went into his oratory without making any promises. Casting himself on his face, he begged God with tears to have mercy on His creation . . . As he was praying, there suddenly blew up a south wind, the sky was filled with clouds, heavy rain descended and there was a great storm.
>
> (Cyr. Scyth. *V. Euthymii* 25, tr. Price (1991) 34–5)

Dramatic though such scenes of intercession might be, they did not exhaust expectations of the Christian holy man. Behind the standard, workaday Christian version of a universe made intelligible in terms of sin, affliction and repentance, there always shimmered the majesty of paradise regained – that is, an image not only of a God placated by bursts of human prayer and contrition, offered to him on behalf of others by his favoured servants, but of an entire world rejoicing in the recovery of its lost order. In large areas of eastern Christianity (and, if in a more diffident and spasmodic manner, also in the west) the holy man brought back to the settled world, from his long sojourn in the wilderness, a touch of the haunting completeness of Adam.[46] Nature, characterized by great antithetical categories, fell into place around him. On his pillar at Telnesin, Symeon radiated an order that seeped from his person, standing in prayer before the court of God, into the column itself and the sacred space around it.

[46] Flusin (1983) 126–8.

Symeon maintained, as if in microcosm, the fundamental boundaries on which all civilized life was held to depend throughout the near east.[47] The clutter of stuffed deer, lions and snakes at the foot of the column spoke of notable breaches in the boundary between the animal and the human world healed in the name of the saint (*V. Sym. Anton.* 15 and *Appendix* 21, Doran (1992) 93 and 225). Further from Telnesin, the blessing of Symeon on the crosses set up in his name around villages in the mountains of Lebanon maintained the boundaries of the settled land against the encroaching disorder of the wild woods. The sexes, also, were held apart. In the women's enclosure at the foot of the terrain that rose towards the column, a female dragon would take her place, along with the five wives of a visiting Yemeni sheikh, demurely receiving her *hnana*, not from the hands of Symeon, but from the mouth of her male companion (*V. Sym. Syr.* 79 and *V. Sym. Anton. Appendix* 25, Doran (1992) 161 and 227).

Symeon was very much a 'revivalist' of a Syrian Christianity that had always been marked by a strong sense of cosmic order and with a consequent concern for the proper separation of the sexes. But an Adam might also pass beyond, as well as reinforce, boundaries that bulked so large in the minds of contemporaries. An 'angelic' man, the holy man trembled on the borderline of those divisions that usually pitted one segment of late Roman society against the other. Not invariably ordained, he was a layman to whom bishops bowed in reverence, as one above whom the hand of God had appeared. Priest or not, his blessing echoed faithfully the domestic practices of any Christian household. He was studiously accessible to both rich and poor, listening attentively to the humble and surprising the cultivated with his untutored spiritual insight. Even the charged barriers between the sexes opened at his touch. When Sabas passed through Scythopolis in 531–2, his attention was drawn to a woman who lay in the colonnade of the main street, isolated even from her fellow beggars by the stench of an uncontrolled menstrual haemorrhage.

> He came over to her in the colonnade and said . . . 'This my hand I lend to you, and I trust in the God that I worship that you will be cured.' Taking the saint's hand, she applied it to the hidden part, and immediately the flux of blood ceased.
>
> (Cyr. Scyth. *V. Sabae* 62, Price (1991) 173)

By such persons, the 'world' itself – that dark place of 'abominations' so often decried in the monastic literature of the time – was healed. In this sense, the holy man was a truly 'angelic' figure. Like the towering angels, he raised his eyes from his clamorous human clientele to contemplate the rich earth, teeming with the possibilities of life. He was responsible to God for all created things. Shenoute was able to stir the tardy Nile to give life once

[47] Well characterized by Doran (1992) 43–5.

again to the land of Egypt; and he did so, not simply as a favoured courtier of God, but, with an ancient congruence, by first making the life-giving liquid of his tears fall on the dead sand of his desert retreat beyond the White Monastery (Besa, *V. Shen.* 102–5, Bell 72–3; see Thélamon (1981) 383).

Christian holy persons had been shot into prominence at this time by an exceptionally stern and world-denying streak in late antique Christianity. Those who approached them, and those who remembered their activities, habitually assumed that they would act upon the spiritual world in terms of expectations that echoed all that was most abrasively up-to-date in the hierarchical and patronage-ridden social structure of the later Roman empire. Yet by sharing through their prayers in the concerns of the mighty angels, holy persons had come to embrace the world. They cradled it, in the Christian imagination, in terms that did better justice to the notion of a God who loved his own creation, and so to the tenacious hopes of an overwhelmingly agrarian society locked in the tyrannical, warm embrace of the earth. By their intercessions, the Christian holy men joined with St Michael the Archangel to look with mercy on humanity in all its joys and cares:

> [on] the strenuous work of our hands . . . the quietness of the oxen and the growth of the lambs . . . the wool of the sheep and the milk of the goats . . . the growth of all the fruits of the field . . . the body of the vine and the fullness [which is] in the wine . . . the fatness and the savour of the olives . . . the slumber of a man and his rest by night . . . the union of holy matrimony, wherein men beget their children for a blessing . . . in war that destroyeth the ungodly, and establisheth peace, and delivereth the righteous . . . in the midst of the brethren [who live together] . . . and towards those who are weary, and when he giveth them strength.
>
> (*Discourse on the Compassion of God and of the Archangel Michael* tr. E. A. W. Budge, *Miscellaneous Coptic Texts* (London 1915) 757–8)

By playing a role in the slow emergence of an imaginative model of the world that had a place for such wide-arching prayers, the Christian saints of late antiquity helped to make Christianity at last, and for a short moment, before the rise of Islam, the one truly universal religion of much of Europe and the middle east.

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